

WEEKLY  
**Cutting Edge**  
INDEPENDENT • INCISIVE ANALYTICAL

**SME**  
**Youth**  
**unemployment—**  
**a silent crisis**



# دَم دَار بَلِيدُ



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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](http://weeklycuttingedge.com), is a premier online source for the analysis of current affairs, providing authoritative insight into, and opinion on, national and international news, business, finance, science and technology, as well as an overview of cultural trends. We have commenced its publication, with an aim to bring the best to our readers; similarly, we intend to offer the best in terms of advertising and promotional impact for our valuable advertisers. The 24-page Cutting Edge is divided among different sections, and we have proportionally divided the space in each section for carrying advertisers' message for the utmost impact.

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# Youth unemployment – a silent crisis

Farhan Khan

According to noted economist Dr Hafiz A Pasha, unemployment in the country now is as high as 22 percent. This figure is 30 percent for males and 17-18 percent for females. This calculation is based on the first-ever digitally-held seventh Population and Housing Census 2023. Among the many pieces of evidence of the worsening unemployment situation is the increasing crime rate in the country in recent months.

Experts cite many factors to explain the phenomenon, the most important being the stagnant state of the economy. Pakistan has experienced low GDP growth for the past three years, which is attributable to the tight monetary and fiscal policy conditions dictated by the International Monetary Fund.

The story is best told through statistics. In 2022-23, growth was negative 0.2 per-

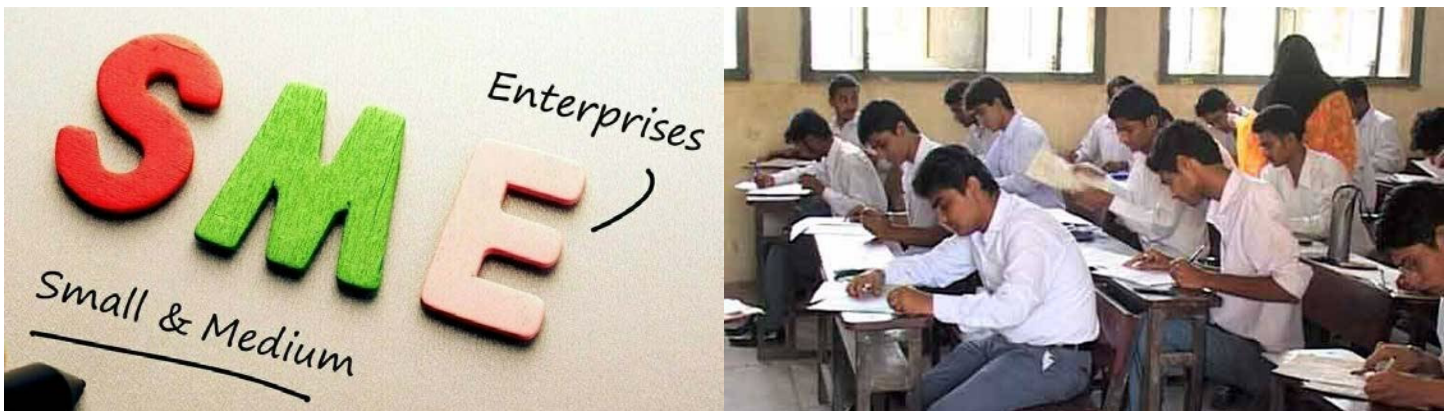
cent. There is a serious mismatch between the jobs demanded and the supply of skills and trained manpower in the country. The economic exclusion of young people is contributing to growing social unrest and is widely believed to be a factor in rising crime rates across the country.

The various issues involved in youth unemployment include gender disparities, and lack of facilities and opportunities for skill development. There is no correlation between educational outcomes and labour market needs, both in rural and underserved regions. The situation is exacerbated by deep-rooted issues like limited access to quality education, insufficient job creation, and gender inequality in economic participation.

A concurrent development is the rise in poverty levels – up to 44.2 percent as reported by the World Bank. This means nearly half of the population now lives below the poverty line,

on human development and more on headline figures such as inflation control and reserve accumulation. This approach fails to address the seminal issues of joblessness, inequality, and economic stagnation. Without a shift in focus towards inclusive and employment-generating policies, the economy will continue to stagnate and decline. It is time we developed a more inclusive strategy with more focus on job creation and poverty reduction, investments in youth skills, vocational training, and digital literacy to empower the youth.

Pakistan's education system produces a workforce that is unprepared for the realities on the ground. Graduates with limited technical skills and no exposure to applied learning enter a job market that increasingly demands versatility, flexibility, digital fluency, and vocational competence. But the government has not yet developed any comprehensive skills



cent followed by 2.5 percent in 2023-24 and 2.8 percent in 2024-25. Revenue collection declined from 12.6 percent of GDP in 2023-24 to 11.7 percent in 2024-25, while the large-scale manufacturing sector registered negative 1.52 percent July-April 2025 against 0.26 percent in the comparable period in the previous year. This rate of economic growth, much lower than the regional average, is hardly sufficient to generate the required number of jobs for the rising generations of youth.

The federal budget 2025-26 shows an unemployment figure at 6.3 per cent, particularly affecting the young persons aged 15-35 years. Youth joblessness is particularly alarming, with 44.9pc of jobseekers aged 15-24, and female unemployment far exceeding male. Pakistan has a domestic labour force of 71.8 million, which is the sixth largest in the world. Each year, approximately 2m young Pakistanis join the labour market, contributing to an expand-

ing talent pool. There is a serious mismatch between the jobs demanded and the supply of skills and trained manpower in the country. While the government boastfully cites the decline in inflation and a rise in foreign exchange reserves, they have little to do with productivity or employment growth.

One reason for rising unemployment and economic difficulties is heavy and excessive taxation being resorted to by the government. Indirect taxes like sales tax, petroleum levies, and withholding tax negatively impact the poor and lower-income groups. Despite repeated claims by government officials to broaden the tax base, no follow-up action has been taken and the rich and super rich and untaxed sectors remain outside the tax net.

This heavy dependence on indirect taxes has had severe consequences on household purchasing power. The current economic framework, which prioritises deficit control and foreign loan accumulation over human development is faulty because it focuses less

development strategy that could bridge this widening gap.

Simultaneously, efforts should be made to promote small and medium enterprises, and other job-intensive industries to solve the unemployment crisis on a long-term basis. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)—which form the backbone of Pakistan's informal economy—can play a vital role in job creation. Small businesses are inherently labour-intensive and absorb a large portion of the unemployed workforce. There is a need to invest in labour-intensive sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing, or construction. These industries hold the potential to generate mass employment at relatively low investment, especially for semi-skilled and unskilled workers. Without thoroughgoing structural reforms, the unemployment situation will worsen in the coming days creating social unrest and political tension in the country.

# Gender gap index ranks Pakistan at the bottom

Nasim Ahmed

The 2025 Global Gender Gap Index examines gender parity in 148 countries, and analyses gender sensitive developments across two-thirds of the world's economies. The Forum has been tracking global progress towards gender parity since 2006.

The 19th index looks at the status of parity across four dimensions – Economic Participation and Opportunity, Educational Attainment, Health and Survival, and Political Empowerment. According to its findings, 68.8% of the global gender gap has been closed, up 0.3 percentage points from last year. The Index finds notable momentum in 2024, with improvements in 11 out of 14 indicators. Top performers among lower-income groups have closed a greater share of their gender gaps than over half of the high-income economies. Till now no single economy has achieved full gender parity.

Iceland comes top for the 16th consecutive year with 92.6% of its gender gap closed – still the only economy to have closed more than 90% of its gap – while Europe dominates the top 10. The top three economies are all Nordic nations, with Finland and Norway ranked second and third, respectively – the same positions as 2024.

The UK has moved up to fourth place – from 14th in 2024 – with 83.8% of the gap closed. This is largely due to its historic, gender-equal cabinet and an increase in the number of women in parliament, which has taken its Political Empowerment score from 47.4% in 2024 to 64.3% in 2025. Moldova is also one of the new entries in the top 10, ranking seventh up from 13th, with 81.3% of its gap closed, and more than tripling its political parity score since 2006. New Zealand is one of the only two non-European economies in the top 10, but drops to fifth from fourth last year, while the other, Namibia, maintains its position in eighth with 81.1% of its gender gap closed.

Latin America and the Caribbean are on track to reach parity in 57 years. The region has advanced 8.6 percentage points since 2006, showing rapid, coordinated progress is achievable. Europe is 76 years away from full parity, and Northern America 89 years, if the present trend continues.

As for regional comparison, in 2025, Southern Asia ranks 7th, with a gender parity score of 64.6%. Of the seven economies in the region, only Bangladesh (24th, 77.5%) finds a place in the top 50. In Economic Participation

and Opportunity, the region scores 40.6%. Over time, Southern Asia has increased its parity score for economic representation for senior workers (+9.1 percentage points) and for professional and technical workers (+17.2 percentage points). However, the parity score in estimated earned income has dropped by -7.8 percentage points. In Educational Attainment, Southern Asia ranks sixth at 95.4pc.

Sadly, Pakistan is at the bottom among 148 countries in the World Economic Forum's (WEF) Global Gender Gap Report 2025 – with 56.7 per cent gender parity. In the latest report, Pakistan has been ranked below Sudan, (57pc, 147th), Chad (57.1pc, 146th), Iran (58.3pc, 145th), Guinea (59.5pc, 144th), Democratic Republic of the Congo (60.1pc, 143rd), Niger (61.3pc, 142nd), Algeria (61.4pc, 141st), and Mali (61.7pc, 140th).

reach 85.1pc. This is due to an increase in female literacy rates (from 46.5pc to 48.5pc). However, parity has also risen because male enrolment shares have dropped in tertiary education, increasing the relative balance between men and women but lowering educational reach overall.

Further, Pakistan's economy has seen political parity drop from 12.2pc in 2024 to 11pc in 2025. While parity in parliament increased by 1.2 percentage points, women's ministerial representation dropped from 5.9pc in 2024 to zero in 2025 and with it the overall sub-index score. Interestingly, Pakistan is listed among countries including Azerbaijan, Hungary, Saudi Arabia, and Vanuatu that have all-male ministerial cabinets.

According to a recent report by the International Labour Organisation (ILO), Pakistan has one of the largest gender pay gaps (GPG)



In this year's index, Pakistan saw its overall parity score decline from last year, from 57pc to 56.7pc. Overall Pakistan has closed +2.3 of its gender gap since 2006. Significantly, this year's results are a second consecutive drop from the economy's best score of 57.7pc, achieved in 2023. Pakistan's parity in economic participation and opportunity has declined by 1.3 percentage points. While economic representation indicators have remained unchanged, income disparity in Pakistan has slightly increased since the last edition (0.02 points), as has wage inequality (4 percentage points).

The only sub-index improvement registered by Pakistan in this year's edition is "Educational Attainment", marking educational parity upwards by 1.5 percentage points to

globally, with women earning significantly less than men in almost all sectors of the economy. The report says that the majority of the pay gap in Pakistan is not due to differences in skills, education or labour market characteristics but based on gender-based discrimination. The report points out that Pakistan's GPG remains higher than that of many other South Asian countries. In Sri Lanka, the GPG based on hourly wages stands at 22pc. In Nepal, it is 18pc. In Bangladesh, the pay gap is actually reversed (-5pc), meaning women, on average, earn slightly more than men. In Pakistan, the GPG is estimated at 25pc when using hourly wages and 30pc when considering monthly wages. Both reports should act as an eye-opener for the authorities that be.

# Pakistan's vanishing workforce

Muhammad Ali

Beneath the government's gleaming façade of economic revival — with inflation cooling, the rupee steady, and a surprising current account surplus — a more troubling story is unfolding. Nearly 285,000 Pakistanis have left the country in just five months, searching for dignity and livelihood abroad.

This isn't a footnote; it's the headline. While official narratives focus on macro gains, the lived experience for millions tells a different tale — one of disillusionment, diminishing opportunity, and a system that's stabilising on paper but unraveling in reality.

The government paints a picture of resurgent economic vigor, yet the steady stream of citizens departing Pakistan for foreign employment tells a more sobering tale — a 12.7% jump in just May alone.

Data from the Bureau of Emigration & Overseas Employment reveals that 59,995 individuals registered for overseas employment in May 2025, marking a sharp rise from 53,231 in April. In total, 285,370 people exited the country between January and May this year, seeking livelihoods elsewhere. Punjab remained the primary wellspring of this outbound tide, while Saudi Arabia emerged as the main beneficiary of this labor exodus.

As more Pakistanis migrate abroad and remittances shift from unregulated to formal conduits, inflow figures have swelled. Remittances touched an impressive \$34.9 billion in the first 11 months of FY2025 — a startling 28.8% rise, spurred largely by remittance flows from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, both of which posted a 20.4% uptick.

The Finance Ministry, seemingly impervious to the deeper implications, lauds this data as a sign of macroeconomic stability. Its report proclaims that GDP grew by 2.7% in FY2025, inflation is retreating, and the external sector is mending — a tale stitched together by prudent fiscal maneuvering and improved fundamentals. Yet this 2.7% figure, polished and paraded, faces skepticism from independent economists who challenge its accuracy and basis.

Each passing month, the numbers swell — May alone saw nearly 60,000 Pakistanis abandon ship, not in pursuit of luxury or indulgence, but out of desperation. These are not hedge-fund managers or tech moguls gaming global tax codes. They are the country's backbone — artisans, tradesmen, technicians — often trained on the state's dime, who have relinquished hope of a respectable wage at home.

Punjab continues to empty out, and the Gulf acts as a sponge for Pakistan's labour class.

This mass departure is not a vote of confidence in local prospects — it is a quiet but scathing indictment of them.

The state, however, interprets this exodus through rose-tinted lenses, celebrating remittances as a balm for its ailing external account. But there is no real accounting for the drain — no metrics quantifying the attrition of skilled labor, the void left by subsidized talent lost to foreign markets, or the erosion of national intellectual capital.

This isn't just migration — it's an economic haemorrhage masquerading as success. The slow bleed of human potential, of institutional knowledge and productive muscle, is something no surge in remittances can mend. This is the silent cost of an economy that celebrates outflow while ignoring the implosion within.

What makes this outflow all the more unsettling is that it's happening in parallel with a government chorus celebrating supposed economic triumphs. Inflation, now at 3.5



percent, has softened. The rupee is holding its ground. Interest rates sit calmly at 11 percent. Even the current account boasts a rare US\$1.8 billion surplus. On spreadsheets, it all reads like a model of macroeconomic poise. But this polished narrative crumbles when stacked against ground-level truths — like the brutal fact that 44 percent of Pakistan's population remains mired below the poverty line. Any credible story of recovery must begin — not end — with that reality.

There's a jarring disconnect in the official messaging. One moment, the government trumpets digitalisation drives, tax reform blueprints, climate pledges, and grand job-creation mantras. The next, it turns a blind eye as nearly half a million citizens quietly abandon the country each year, unable to locate even a sliver of opportunity at home. The underprivileged remain shackled by generational hardship, while the middle class erodes with each passing fiscal quarter. If this is truly the onset of a new

economic dawn, then it's one eerily devoid of its people.

Even the much-trumpeted 2.7 percent GDP growth figure, still shadowed by independent scrutiny and awaiting validation from a yet-to-convene expert panel, fails to evoke faith. Industrial output stagnates. Agriculture leans precariously on cotton forecasts. Services are limp, weakened by anaemic domestic appetite. For Large-Scale Manufacturing (LSM) to salvage the year's numbers, it would have to post an improbable 8 percent surge in just two months — an exercise less in performance, more in creative accounting. Are we truly reviving the economy, or merely reverse-engineering a mirage?

The chronic ailments remain untreated. Energy pricing reforms, privatisation roadmaps, and revenue overhauls are still inked on PowerPoint slides — not balance sheets. The fixation on stabilising headline figures has cannibalised the urgency for equitable, broad-based growth. Migration has been rebranded as relief — a release valve for economic despair — rather than a glaring symptom of systemic rot. It's not a policy success. It's a policy void, thinly veiled.

In the long arc, the consequences will run deep. A society that exports its brightest minds, trained hands, and motivated youth is left threadbare. Who then shoulders the tax base, keeps the clinics running, constructs the roads, and schools the future? This isn't just labour flight. It's national hollowing — the quiet evacuation of capacity, competence, and cohesion.

Let's be clear: this isn't recovery. It's rotation — of the workforce, of official stories, of old problems dressed in new slogans. If the state continues to chase balance sheet victories without overhauling the structural scaffolding underneath, it will mistake calm for cure. A firm currency doesn't mean a fair economy. Subdued inflation doesn't promise dignity. A fiscal surplus on paper doesn't equal surplus prospects for the average citizen.

What it means, for now, is that nearly 285,000 people have already cast their vote — not in a ballot box, but with their feet. And that fact, more than any glowing economic indicator, should rattle anyone still paying attention.

This isn't economic recovery — it's a revolving door of departures, deflections, and repackaged problems. The government may celebrate balanced books, but it cannot ignore the gaping deficit in hope, trust, and opportunity. A resilient currency means little in a brittle society. When hundreds of thousands leave, not for luxury but for survival, the signal is clear: the economic model isn't lifting people — it's leaving them behind. The real crisis isn't external — it's the silent evacuation of faith from within

# Industrial revival or bureaucratic maze?

Husnain Shahid

After decades of industrial atrophy, Pakistan's long-awaited 10-year industrial policy arrives with promises of reform and renewal. From tax revisions to SME support, the framework suggests a serious pivot. Yet behind the polished structure lies a critical flaw — the absence of key industrial voices. With over a dozen committees formed and the Pakistan Business Council (PBC) conspicuously sidelined, the question looms: Can a national revival plan succeed without the participation of those who power the engine?

For nearly thirty weary years, Pakistan's industrial backbone has been progressively hollowed, its once-pulsing arteries reduced to creaking pipes. The recent greenlight granted by the government for a decade-spanning industrial revival policy is less a triumph and more a belated necessity — yet its arrival warrants a nod of cautious acknowledgment.

The framework, by and large, strikes the right neural clusters — pledging resurrection of moribund enterprises, fortification of small and medium economic engines, rationalisation of corporate tax regimes, and excavation of obsolete legislative debris. The formation of granular sub-committees for swift operationalisation gives the proposal a spine — something often absent in earlier half-hearted declarations.

Still, the most elaborate scaffold crumbles when key architects are banished from the drafting table. The disquiet voiced by the Pakistan Business Council (PBC) illuminates a stark paradox — how does a national blueprint for industrial resurgence omit the counsel of those commanding the lion's share of industrial heft? Especially a body like PBC, which has consistently agitated for such a roadmap and underpinned its plea with exhaustive data under its "Make-in-Pakistan" rubric?

As the PBC rightly highlights, the draft blueprint was neither floated for review nor was the council's representation meaningfully included in the pivotal sub-committees charting the policy's course. Instead, trader collectives appear to have commandeered the seats, stirring misgivings that the entire apparatus may be veering toward ephemeral mercantile gratifications instead of a long-haul industrial renaissance.

This isn't a trifling lapse. The PBC embodies close to 100 of the nation's industrial juggernauts — domestic and multinational — which collectively catalyse around 40% of ex-

ports and lubricate employment across formal supply arteries. Marginalising such a reservoir of applied intelligence and institutional memory diminishes the structural integrity of any revivalist ambition. If reinvigorating the industrial ecosystem is the proclaimed aim, then eclipsing those who constitute its very spine is both myopic and maladroit.

Granted, the administration's haste is not unfounded. The industrial sector has languished in contraction, exports are sputtering, and macroeconomic tremors demand an urgent recalibration. The government often invoke the phrase "industrial revolution." Yet, revolutions are not midwived by committees bereft of expertise. Certainly not ones that ignore their most competent co-architects.

A closer dissection reveals a sprawling labyrinth of committees — eight advisory clusters, ten execution arms, and an anticipated swarm of oversight panels waiting in the wings. On parchment, this looks grand —



intricate, even — but if the skeleton becomes more theatre than tool, and expert wisdom remains untranslated into real-world reform, then this intricate edifice risks sinking into the swamp of bureaucratic inertia.

The document does boast elements of foresight — improved credit pipelines for SMEs, early-warning systems for industrial ailments, and a legal environment more hospitable to investors. Yet, noble aspirations alone do not animate transformation. The durability of these reforms will rest, not on proclamation, but on the spine of their implementation — which again circles us back to the absentees at the policy table.

It is vital to underscore that the Pakistan

Business Council hasn't tossed this policy into the dustbin. On the contrary, it has greeted the blueprint's thrust with measured optimism and endorsed several of its objectives. Its critique is not aimed at the vision, but at the closed-door process by which that vision was sculpted. This divergence between ambition and methodology intensifies the necessity for a corrective gesture from the state.

A sincere recalibration — one that reevaluates the makeup of the implementation machinery and folds the PBC into the operational heart of the policy — would do more than mend bruised egos. It would broadcast a message of governance maturity and restore faith in institutional accountability.

If this grand scheme is to evolve beyond rhetorical flourish and catalyse a genuine industrial resurgence, then it must tether itself to informed stewardship and flawless execution. That necessitates deploying institutions armed with intellect, data troves, and connective sin-

ews — those who can convert blueprint into backbone. Anything less would be yet another manuscript in the state's archive of unfulfilled economic blueprints, gathering dust while the wheels of industry remain rusted still.

For this policy to be more than ceremonial ink on paper, it must be built not just on intent, but on informed collaboration. Execution without expertise breeds delay; ambition without inclusion breeds distrust. If Pakistan truly seeks to revive its industrial core, it must draw on the institutions best equipped to turn vision into verifiable outcomes. Without that, this policy risks becoming just another chapter in the country's long anthology of missed economic opportunities.

# SOEs: Pakistan's Rs6tr sinkhole

Shahid Hussain

Pakistan's state-owned enterprises (SOEs) are rapidly becoming unsustainable fiscal sinkholes, their structural decay and operational lethargy dragging the national economy into deeper peril.

With cumulative losses ballooning and debt scaling unprecedented heights, these once-pivotal institutions now symbolize chronic inefficiency, political inertia, and financial fragility. As sector-wide losses inch toward Rs600 billion annually, and total SOE debt crosses Rs8.8 trillion, the urgency for systemic reform can no longer be postponed.

The SOEs are hemorrhaging finances on an extraordinary scale, having amassed cumulative losses that now tower at Rs5.9 trillion. Just in the initial half of fiscal year 2025, a fresh financial haemorrhage of Rs345 billion exacerbated the already dire ledger. In parallel, unfunded pension burdens from 15 public-sector giants have surged to a daunting Rs1.7 trillion, underscoring the weight of long-ignored liabilities. The cancer of circular debt has gnawed away at the fiscal musculature of otherwise solvent state-run conglomerates such as GHPL, OGDCL, PSO, and PPL. Entangled in a web of inter-corporate dues, these entities now wrestle with Rs4.9 trillion in mutual obligations, eroding not only balance sheet clarity but also strangling operational agility. The power sector, plagued by chronic inefficiency, accounts for nearly half—Rs2.4 trillion—of this enervating debt quagmire.

The latest bi-annual dossier on SOEs paints a financial landscape rife with dysfunction. Foremost among the loss-generating leviathans is the National Highways Authority (NHA), clocking a staggering Rs153.3 billion in losses—ballooning its cumulative deficit to Rs1,953.4 billion. Its toll-based revenue model, structurally unsustainable, has proven a bottomless pit. Similar fiscal decay afflicts the Quetta Electric Supply Company (QESCO) and Sukkur Electric Power Company (SEPCO), hemorrhaging Rs58.1 billion and Rs29.6 billion respectively, inflating their historic losses to Rs770.6 billion and Rs473 billion—grim testaments to a crumbling distribution infrastructure.

This financial autopsy, mandated under the IMF's reform protocols, also spotlights other institutional black holes. Pakistan Railways slumped with a Rs6.7 billion shortfall (adding to Rs26.5 billion cumulative losses), while Peshawar Electric Supply Company (PESCO) plunged by Rs19.7 billion, swelling its aggregate deficit to Rs684.9 billion. Pakistan Steel Mills (PSM), a monument to industrial atrophy, posted a Rs15.6 billion bleed, dragging its total losses to a jaw-dropping Rs255.8 billion. Elsewhere, Pakistan Telecommunication Company Limited

(PTCL) reported a Rs7.2 billion dip (Rs43.6 billion in lifetime erosion), Pakistan Post notched Rs6.3 billion in red ink (Rs93.1 billion in historic losses), and Utility Stores Corporation, with Rs4.1 billion in fresh losses, now drowns under Rs15.5 billion in total arrears. These figures illuminate systemic entropy and administrative inertia. Power generation outfits, notably the GENCOs (I through IV), collectively lost Rs8.3 billion: Guddu (GENCO-II) with Rs3.8 billion, Muzaffargarh (GENCO-III) at Rs3.1 billion, and Jamshoro (GENCO-I) at Rs1.3 billion. Neelum Jhelum Hydro Power Company, another critical node, recorded a Rs2.3 billion loss, its total deficits stacking up to Rs58.2 billion. The collective abyss formed by "All Other" SOEs added Rs2.7 billion in new losses, elevating their cumulative financial ruin to Rs1,285.96 billion—raising the grand total across more than 15 bleeding entities to an astonishing Rs5,893.2 billion. It's a fiscal autopsy revealing institutional rot down to the marrow.

Delving deeper into the six-month fiscal review of power distribution companies (DISCOs), a troubling pattern emerges—one of escalating structural collapse. Once the sugarcoat of government subsidies is stripped away, the raw, unadulterated operational losses tally up to Rs283.7 billion. Quetta Electric Supply Company Limited leads this financial exsanguination with Rs92.65 billion in genuine losses, trailed by PESCO at Rs53.68 billion and Hyderabad Electric Supply Company Limited at Rs39.63 billion.

Even relatively stable DISCOs like Multan, Faisalabad, and Gujranwala, which posted EBIT figures of Rs8.4 billion, Rs52 billion, and Rs20.9 billion respectively, unravelled into deficit zones once subsidies were yanked away—plunging into actual losses of Rs35.17 billion, Rs13.12 billion, and Rs7.32 billion correspondingly. Other regional distributors—Lahore, Islamabad, Sukkur, and the Tribal areas—exhibited fleeting gains or nominal losses, yet faltered fatally post-adjustment. The debacle at Quetta's DISCO is particularly damning: an EBIT vacuum of Rs60.36 billion, even after Rs32.3 billion in subsidies, still left a gaping fiscal crater.

Layered atop this monetary ruin is a persisting technical and commercial attrition rate of 20pc in electricity units—evidence of endemic failures in metering, collection, and transmission architecture. This isn't mere mismanagement—it's a systemic, spiraling collapse demanding ruthless recalibration.

The ingrained structural frailty within Pakistan's state-run energy framework has driven the six-month sectoral average loss perilously close to Rs300 billion—projecting an annual hemorrhage of Rs600 billion. This runaway fiscal leakage unveils a glaring and time-sensitive

call for systemic transformation. Unless swift and surgical reforms are executed—focusing on governance recalibration, digital optimization, privatization initiatives or concession-driven models, and tariff architecture rationalization—the economic rot will deepen, not only exacerbating the burden on the national treasury but also stalling comprehensive energy sector regeneration and deterring capital infusion.

Compounding this fiscal distress is the surge in sovereign guarantees, which have escalated to Rs2,245 billion—an uptick from the prior Rs1,400 billion mark. This spike stems largely from the integration of self-liquidating guarantees granted to entities such as PASSCO and the Trading Corporation of Pakistan (TCP). Yet, the methodology employed to evaluate these guarantees remains suboptimal, lacking harmony with global benchmarking standards. A strategic recalibration of this framework is imperative. Despite the predominance of loss-making enterprises, a handful of state-run corporations have managed to remain profitable, collectively generating Rs457.2 billion. Among these, Oil and Gas Development Company Limited (OGDCL) emerged as the crown jewel, raking in Rs82.5 billion. Faisalabad Electric Supply Company Limited (FESCO) followed closely with Rs53.5 billion, though this figure is heavily padded by Rs38.9 billion in government subsidies and Rs5.8 billion in ancillary income. Pakistan Petroleum Limited (PPL) also held firm with Rs49.9 billion, while National Power Parks Management Company Limited (NPPMCL) showcased commendable fiscal performance with Rs37.4 billion in profits.

Mounting debt, exacerbated by misaligned operations, market turbulence, and decaying infrastructure, renders the government increasingly exposed to contingent fiscal shocks. Credit risk, in particular, looms large. Numerous SOEs are tethered to the state's credit umbrella, surviving on sovereign guarantees while wrestling with delayed receivables that compel borrowing at punishing rates—tightening the noose around the government's fiscal leeway.

The SOEs, once intended as engines of national development, have devolved into colossal liabilities, siphoning resources while delivering diminishing returns. The illusion of sustainability—propped up by subsidies, sovereign guarantees, and state bailouts—is quickly unraveling. Without a bold, uncompromising pivot toward structural reform—encompassing governance overhauls, privatization, debt restructuring, and revenue model recalibration—the state risks further fiscal destabilization. The warning signs are blaring: unless decisive action is taken, these enterprises will continue to strangle economic recovery, repel investment, and drain the country's already strained financial reserves

# Strategic calculations behind Russia's recognition of Afghan Taliban

Raza Khan

The Russian Federation has recently become the first country to formally recognize the Afghan Taliban regime, raising hopes within the group that broader international recognition may follow. Prior to this, Pakistan had also upgraded its diplomatic engagement with the Taliban government, although it stopped short of full recognition.

Securing diplomatic recognition from Moscow is a significant achievement for the Taliban regime. Russia is a global power and a key regional player, and its recognition adds substantial symbolic weight. However, Moscow's move is far more complex than a simple gesture of goodwill or improved bilateral ties. The decision is deeply rooted in broader geopolitical considerations—especially Russia's ongoing war with Ukraine, now in its fourth year.

It appears that the Kremlin's expectations of a short conflict in Ukraine have not materialized. Instead, the prolonged war is straining Russian military and strategic resources. A recent example is the death of Russia's deputy naval chief in a Ukrainian attack—a major blow for a country that prides itself on military strength. Compounding the pressure is increased military and financial support from European allies to Kyiv.

This sustained conflict has revealed limitations in Russia's ability to assist its traditional allies. Notably, during the recent Iran-Israel/US confrontation, Moscow failed to intervene meaningfully to support Tehran, which suffered considerable—perhaps irreparable—damage to its nuclear infrastructure. This raised serious questions in Moscow about the effectiveness of its alliances.

Significantly, Russia's recognition of the Taliban came shortly after the Iran-Israel/US military escalation. The timing suggests a strategic recalibration. Russia may now view the Afghan Taliban as a potentially more reliable partner in the Greater Middle East, particularly as Iran's military vulnerability has become apparent. This reassessment could extend to other regional actors, including Pakistan.

Several strategic considerations likely shaped Moscow's decision. Chief among them is the issue of regional stability. Afghanistan borders Central Asia—Russia's so-called “soft underbelly”—and any instability there could have serious repercussions. A chaotic Afghanistan could fuel insurgency and separatist movements in Muslim-majority regions within the Russian Federation, including the North Caucasus.

Russia may also have noted the Taliban's relative success in maintaining control since their return to power in August 2021. Over the past three and a half years, no credible anti-Taliban movement—such as the so-called Afghan Resistance Front—has emerged to pose a meaningful threat. Given this, Moscow may have concluded that backing the Taliban is the pragmatic option to ensure a minimum level of order and prevent a security vacuum.

It's also worth recalling that when the Taliban first took power in 1996, they adopted an openly anti-Russia stance. That the Kremlin is now willing to set aside this historical antagonism underscores how dramatically strategic calculations have shifted.

The Afghan Taliban's earlier anti-Russian stance compelled Moscow to support the anti-Taliban Afghan Northern Alliance (ANA)



led by the Tajik commander Ahmad Shah Masoud. Alongside Iran, Russia provided the ANA with military and logistical support in an effort to oust the Taliban from Kabul, but these efforts fell short. However, the dynamics changed dramatically when the Taliban began hosting anti-American groups like Al-Qaeda, led by Osama bin Laden, as well as anti-Russian Muslim Chechen militants. Following the 9/11 attacks—claimed by Bin Laden and attributed to Al-Qaeda by President George W. Bush—the United States, together with its NATO allies, formed an alliance with the ANA to remove the Taliban from power. Moscow, though not actively involved, remained silent—welcoming the Taliban's downfall at the hands of the U.S.-led coalition.

In stark contrast, Russia has now extended diplomatic recognition to the Afghan Taliban regime. This move is widely seen as a strategic effort to ensure that the Taliban do not create security challenges for Central Asia and, by extension, the Russian Federation. A key motivation appears to be Russia's desire to preempt instability from spilling into its southern borders, especially given the prox-

imity of Afghanistan to the volatile Central Asian states and Muslim-majority regions within Russia.

China's growing influence on Russian foreign policy may also have contributed to Moscow's shift. Presently, Beijing holds significant diplomatic sway over Moscow. China has been one of the few countries to engage the Taliban diplomatically—appointing a full ambassador to Kabul and accepting the Taliban-appointed envoy in Beijing. However, Beijing has still refrained from formally recognizing the Taliban regime. Nevertheless, in pursuit of regional stability and to protect its interests—particularly in Xinjiang and along the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor—China may have encouraged Moscow to reconsider its stance toward the Taliban.

Whether Russia's recognition will help resolve the Taliban regime's broader legitimacy and governance challenges remains uncertain. In practical terms, Russia's diplomatic clout is not strong enough to trigger a domino effect of recognition by other countries. The only potential candidate that might follow Moscow's lead is Iran. Despite receiving little meaningful support from Russia during its recent confrontation with Israel and the United States, Tehran remains a close ally of Moscow. However, Iran's relationship with the Taliban is complicated by past grievances—most notably the killing of several Iranian diplomats during the Taliban's first rule in the late 1990s, an incident that nearly led to open conflict.

Even if Iran were to recognize the Taliban regime, it would not significantly alter the diplomatic isolation Kabul faces. Like Russia, Iran lacks the global influence needed to shift international consensus. Real international legitimacy for the Taliban can only come if key players such as Pakistan—Afghanistan's most influential neighbor—formally recognize and support the regime, and if other critical nations like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Germany follow suit. However, countries such as the United Kingdom are highly unlikely to extend recognition, given the Taliban's continued human rights violations and their failure to honor commitments made in the February 2020 Doha Accord.

In conclusion, while Russia's recognition of the Taliban marks a significant geopolitical shift, it alone is insufficient to break the diplomatic deadlock facing the Taliban regime. Without broader regional and international backing—especially from Pakistan and influential Gulf and Western countries—the Taliban's quest for legitimacy will remain elusive.

# A tale of two realities — Education in Gilgit-Baltistan

Rasheed Ali

For the rugged, breathtaking region of Gilgit-Baltistan (GB), known for its soaring peaks and resilient people, the story of education is both inspiring and troubling — a landscape of progress scattered with deep inequalities. Despite its rich cultural heritage and strategic significance, the region has long been neglected in the national conversation, especially when it comes to its most vital sector: education.

Across GB's seven districts, a striking contrast unfolds. In Hunza and Ghizer, the literacy rate soars to over 70 per cent — among the highest in Pakistan.

Modern classrooms, active community involvement, and high-performing schools, run by the Aga Khan Education Services, paint a picture of hope. But just a few valleys away, in districts like Diamer and Astore, the numbers plummet — literacy hovers below 40 per cent, and many children never see the inside of a functioning school. Around 90,000 children across the region remain out of school, nearly a third of the school-age population.

With a population of approximately 1.8 million, GB's overall literacy rate stands at around 58 per cent. Gender disparity remains stark — 71 per cent of men are literate, compared to just 45 per cent of women. School enrollment is uneven, and the gender parity index worsens at the secondary level, where girls face the highest dropout rates. Much of this is linked to poor infrastructure: nearly 40 per cent of schools lack functioning toilets, many don't have clean drinking water, and classroom furniture is either broken or non-existent. In winter, when temperatures plummet in valleys like Skardu and Ghanche, schools often become inaccessible or simply too cold to attend due to the lack of a heating system.

Teachers, too, are in short supply. One or two educators often teach multiple grades,

especially in girls' schools, where science and mathematics specialists are rare. Schools lack laboratories and computer rooms, and electricity is unreliable in many remote areas. Solar panels, though introduced in some schools, often fall into disrepair due to lack of maintenance funding.

Despite these hardships, GB's education sector has not been entirely without support. Over the past two decades, major donors like UNICEF, the World Bank, and the Aga Khan Foundation have supplemented local efforts with targeted programs, including school reconstruction, early childhood education, and

leadership disqualifications have hampered long-term policy continuity.

Through these political cycles, budget allocations for education have increased gradually — from Rs. 1-2 billion in the mid-2000s to over Rs. 11.5 billion in 2024-25. Yet, challenges in utilisation persist. Funds are often delayed by the federal government, development priorities skew toward urban centres like Gilgit and Skardu, and local administrative capacity remains weak. Education consistently receives around 18-20 per cent of the GB budget, but maintenance budgets remain negligible, and higher secondary and vocational training con-



girls' scholarship schemes. Most recently, digital classrooms and solar-powered schools have been introduced in a limited number of areas under government and donor-backed pilots.

The political landscape of GB has shifted multiple times in the last 20 years, beginning with the Pakistan People's Party's rule after the 2009 Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Governance Order, which granted the region its first elected assembly. The Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz took over in 2015, focusing on infrastructure and aligning its projects with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Since 2020, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf has led the region, though internal rifts and

tinue to be underfunded.

While new teaching posts, digital learning pilots, and female-focused scholarship programs signal progress, systemic gaps are far from closed. What remains clear is that Gilgit-Baltistan's students — perched between promise and neglect — deserve more than partial fixes. In a region where mountains meet the sky, the path to equal, quality education remains steep — but not insurmountable, if political will, fiscal commitment, and community engagement align.

For now, Gilgit-Baltistan remains a tale of two educational realities — one of inspiring resilience, and another of unmet potential.

# From exodus to erosion: How rural collapse is unmaking Pakistan's cities

Dr. Zaheer Ahmad Babar

A silent transformation is reshaping Pakistan—not in its parliament or markets, but in the quiet despair of its countryside and the teeming chaos of its cities. As rural regions continue to unravel under the weight of neglect and climate-induced catastrophe, millions are being driven into cities that are already buckling at the seams. What began as a survival instinct is now a full-blown demographic rupture—one that threatens to fracture the very foundation of national cohesion.

Amidst a landscape where nearly two-thirds of the populace—exceeding 150 million souls—resides in the rural hinterlands, it is a stark indictment of national priorities that these regions remain shackled by decaying infrastructure, skeletal employment prospects, and an egregious dearth of essential amenities.

This persistent deprivation is not an accidental consequence but the cumulative echo of systemic neglect. These far-flung regions narrate a generational saga of abandonment, where poverty has become ancestral and marginalisation is almost institutionalised. Lofty rhetoric surrounding rural rejuvenation echoes through officialdom, yet substantive transformation remains a mirage—talk abundant, action elusive.

In this grim tableau, the government's recent proclamation—on July 6, the World Day for Rural Development—of sweeping reforms to elevate rural existence feels like *déjà vu*. Such pledges only carry weight if anchored in unflinching political resolve, fortified fiscal commitments, and tangible uplift that alters the lived reality of countryside dwellers.

Rural Pakistan is not merely a demographic majority—it is the sinew and skeleton of the nation's economy. These territories sustain the agricultural machine, which in turn is the primary conduit for economic continuity and livelihood creation. Nearly 70 percent of the population survives on its yield, with 37.4 percent directly engaged in agronomic toil.

Beyond nurturing domestic food reserves, this sector energises pivotal industries, especially textiles—still the nation's industrial juggernaut and preeminent export engine. Agriculture underwrites approximately 70 percent of the export ledger and contributes a formidable 24 percent to the gross domestic product, cementing its indispensable stature.

To marginalise rural domains, then, is

not a benign oversight—it is an act of economic self-sabotage. The decay of these zones has precipitated waning crop yields, spiraling poverty, and a paralysing drought of employment alternatives. With little on offer beyond the plough and sickle, stagnation has calcified into a grim permanence.

Worse still, this economic alienation has cast a long shadow over our urban agglomerations. Years of rural decay and capital starvation have triggered a relentless exodus—millions uprooted in search of sustenance, flooding cities already strained under the weight of unchecked expansion.

In sum, the tale of Pakistan's rural quarters is not just one of neglect—it is one of squandered potential, of vital arteries left to



wither, and of a nation persistently amputating its own limbs while pretending to march forward.

Climate upheavals have now become an accelerating catalyst in displacing rural communities—especially those gutted by flooding—further swelling the migratory torrent into Pakistan's already overburdened cities. This cascading upheaval was starkly evident in the aftermath of the calamitous 2022 deluge, and earlier, during the cataclysm of 2010—both disasters upended the lives of millions, forcing entire villages into reluctant exodus and semi-permanent exile.

These displacements are not mere footnotes of natural calamity—they are tectonic demographic shifts. Urban expansion now eclipses rural population growth at a staggering rate of 3.67% against 1.88%, redrawing the nation's demographic map in real-time.

The consequence? An uncontrolled swell

of predominantly youthful migrants pouring into cities ill-equipped to absorb them. The result has been the metastasis of urban slums—unregulated, unplanned, and untreated wounds on the face of urban Pakistan. These makeshift shantytowns sprawl like fungal overgrowth, bereft of clean water, electricity, sanitation, healthcare, and education. Here, humanity exists—not in dignity—but in daily peril.

What is unfurling before us is the fraying of the urban tapestry itself—thread by thread. With every unchecked influx, cities inch closer to implosion: poverty deepens, disease festers, ecological decay accelerates, crime festers, and inequality entrenches itself like rot in timber. The implications are not merely municipal—they are existential, threatening the glue of national unity.

This impending unraveling can no longer be ignored. If urban collapse is to be averted, rural renaissance must be pursued with urgency and depth. Agriculture must be infused with new lifeblood—especially the embattled cotton crop—through innovation, resource support, and yield-enhancing techniques. Infrastructure in the hinterlands must be resurrected from ruin. Education, health, and civic utilities must be not luxuries, but guarantees. Rural economies must diversify—beyond ploughshares—to carve out sustainable, dignified livelihoods.

Parallel to economic renewal, a robust climate shield must be erected. This entails the deployment of real-time early warning systems, smart irrigation, flood-resistant infrastructure, and regenerative land management strategies that anticipate, not just react to, environmental volatility. At the core lies a simple, haunting truth—no one forfeits their ancestral soil by choice. Only desperation displaces. The villages of Pakistan must be rekindled not as places to endure, but as places where futures are forged, not forfeited.

The crisis facing Pakistan is not confined to villages lost to floods or slums swelling on urban margins—it is the erosion of the nation's balance. Until rural Pakistan becomes a place of opportunity rather than abandonment, migration will continue to outpace planning, and cities will keep disintegrating under the strain. A rural revival is no longer an option—it is the only path left to halt this silent collapse and rebuild a future grounded in dignity, resilience, and shared prosperity.

# The superhero film genre is on a decline, and so is American empire

Keith A Spencer

Last week, Warner Bros Pictures released a new reboot of the Superman film series. The movie soared to the top of the box office and grossed an estimated \$122m in the United States in its opening weekend. Though the industry is celebrating the film's early box office totals, they are well below the earnings of comparable blockbusters from a decade ago. For example, in its opening weekend in 2016, Warner Bros's *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* reaped a healthy \$166m (\$224m when adjusted for inflation).

Indeed, over the past few years, revenues from such films have steadily fallen, and the new Superman film is not an exception. In the 2010s, superhero movies regularly reaped more than \$500m worldwide in box office totals. In recent years, far fewer have reached that high watermark — a fact that is causing unease in the industry. Last year, Hollywood trade magazine *Variety* warned that the genre was experiencing an “unprecedented box office drought”.

What made superhero movies fall off? According to Hollywood bigwigs, the reason is “superhero fatigue”, as Superman director James Gunn put it. Disney CEO Bob Iger opined that the prolific output of superhero movies “diluted [the audience's] focus and attention”. But their narrative — that consumers are simply getting “fatigued” with the genre — is reductive. As with all artistic genres, there are reasons why some rise or fall in popularity. Those reasons are intimately tied to politics.

Superhero fiction is a uniquely US genre, arguably invented in 1938 with the publication of the first Superman comic book. The first superhero comic adaptation was released in 1941 under the title *Adventures of Captain Marvel*. The genre was popular among Americans for decades, but it really took off following the 9/11 attacks in 2001.

Those attacks punctured the relative tranquillity (in the US, at least) of the post-Cold War era and put the US propaganda machine into overdrive. Americans were fed a cartoonish portrait of what a “supervillain” looked like, which fit easily into superhero movie narratives. These supervillains were — like America's purported enemies — bent on global domination and opposed to liberalism and US hegemony.

The Pentagon played a prominent role in shaping propagandistic narratives in popular culture. As a longtime partner of Hollywood, the Department of Defense has long had the

practice of loaning out military equipment to filmmakers in exchange for script approval rights. In the post-9/11 era, it had a say in the scripts of a number of superhero blockbusters, including *Iron Man* and *Captain America*. *Captain Marvel* was even used as a recruitment tool for pilots by the US air force.

As a result, many superhero movies depict the US military and superheroes working hand-in-hand to defeat supervillainy, jointly pushing a vision of Pax Americana: a world where the dominant global power is the US.

The protagonists are often portrayed as defenders of “American ideals” like democracy, inclusivity, and justice. Take someone like *Captain America*, who originated as a literal embodiment of the US cultural victory over fascism. Other popular superheroes of the past 20 years, like *Black Panther*, embodied liberal America's multicultural, pluralistic ideals. But in recent years, the political reality those heroes are meant to uphold has begun to fracture. A September 2024 poll asked Americans whether they agreed with the statement “my country's leader should have total, unchecked authority”. An astonishing 57.4 percent of US respondents agreed.

Another poll conducted a year earlier found that 45 percent of Americans “point to people seeing racial discrimination where it really doesn't exist as the larger issue”. It increasingly seems that America as a liberal, pluralistic society — the way it is depicted in superhero films — is no longer a universal aspiration for many Americans.

There is also growing scepticism towards America's moral authority and superpower standing in the world. A 2024 poll from Fox News found that 62 percent of American voters described the US as “on the decline”. Only 26 percent thought it was rising. A 2023 poll from Pew Research — a year before Donald Trump was re-elected — reported that 58 percent of those polled said that “life in America is worse today than it was 50 years ago”.

While public perceptions gradually changed in the post-9/11 period, there were events that accelerated this shift. The precipitous drop in superhero movie box office totals began in 2020. Why that year? This was when the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated already growing societal divisions. The sense of a cohesive national identity fully shattered with the onset of this unprecedented public health emergency. Widespread mistrust of the government's ability to manage the crisis — coupled with a deeply individualistic streak in Americans that precluded any understanding of social obligations that would prevent mass

death, such as social distancing or lockdown measures — fostered a furious and splintered American body politic.

The singular vision of liberal American righteousness suggested by superhero films could not resonate amid this factional political landscape. A year later came the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. The decision to pull out upset the notion of the US as a “heroic” intervener — a sort of global superman — heavily projected after 9/11. In contrast to Iraq, Afghanistan was long presented as a potential “success story”, or as *The New York Times* put it in 2005: the “American-led intervention that could wind up actually making people's lives better”.

Of course, we all know how that turned out: the US entered Afghanistan in 2001 and exited in 2021, having killed more than 100,000 people and spent \$2.3 trillion to pause Taliban rule for 20 years. With its military power failing abroad and tensions rising at home, the US did not seem like a place that anyone — superhero or mortal — believed in any more. Inevitably, the domestic ills ignored by the political elites came to the fore. Real wages had been in decline for 30 years, while income inequality had been increasing, and infrastructure — decaying.

Americans on both left and right began to question the fitness of the US political system, long portrayed as the best in the world. Many on the left now believe that corporate interests have so thoroughly captured the Democratic Party that they have ceased fighting for real wealth redistribution or social programmes, and conspire against progressive candidates who do believe in these things. Meanwhile, the American right has grown more venal, racist and authoritarian — the result of failing to understand the true reasons behind the country's socioeconomic crises.

Superhero movies are an optimistic as well as a nationalistic genre — their primary message is that America, and the liberal order in general, are worth defending. But Americans no longer seem optimistic about the future, nor particularly attached to these ideological values. Fewer Americans seem to even believe in liberal pillars like democracy and multiculturalism — the kinds of things that superheroes typically fight for.

If we cannot seem to agree on what American values even are, it is understandable that we cannot agree on what kind of hero would embody the national spirit. Given these dispiriting political conditions, perhaps it is not super-surprising that Americans are not flocking to the superhero genre like they once did.

# Gaza is running out of blood

Donya Abu Sitta

I live near Nasser Hospital in the west of Khan Younis city. Almost every day, I hear desperate calls for blood donations made on loudspeakers out of the hospital. It has been like that for more than a year.

The hospital, like other barely functioning health facilities in Gaza, has been regularly overwhelmed with victims of continuing Israeli air attacks. Since the end of May, it has also received many victims shot by Israeli soldiers at aid distribution sites.

I had donated blood before, and I felt it was my duty to do it again. So one morning last month, I headed to Nasser Hospital. While the blood was being drawn from my arm, I felt severe dizziness, and I thought I was going to faint. My friend, Nurse Hanan, who was one of the workers in the blood donation campaign, rushed to me and raised my legs to increase the blood flow to my brain until I felt better. She went to test my blood, and after 10 minutes returned to tell me that I was suffering from severe anaemia and malnutrition. My blood did not contain the minimum nutrients necessary for donation.

Hanan told me that my case was not an exception. She explained that most of the people who visited the hospital to donate blood suffer from anaemia and malnutrition as a result of the ongoing Israeli blockade and the absence of nutritious food, such as meat, milk, eggs and fruits. Two-thirds of the blood units donated at the hospital have extremely low haemoglobin and iron levels, which makes them unusable for blood transfusions.

In early June, Dr Sofia Za'arab, director of the Laboratory and Blood Bank, told the media that the severe shortage of donated blood units has reached "critical" levels, threatening the lives of patients, many of whom require urgent blood transfusions. The whole of Gaza needs 400 units daily. "Despite contacting the Ministry of Health in the West Bank to transfer blood units, the occupation authorities prevented their entry [into Gaza]," Dr Za'arab said. After the failed blood donation, I returned home crushed. I knew the famine

was affecting me. I have lost a lot of weight. I suffer from constant fatigue, chronic joint pain, headaches, and dizziness. Even when I write my journalistic articles or study, I need to take short breaks.

But the revelation of how bad my health condition is really struck me. For months now, my family and I have been eating only pasta and rice, due to the astronomical cost of flour. We eat one meal a day, and sometimes even half a meal to give more food to my younger siblings. I worry about them being malnourished. They have also lost a lot of weight and are constantly asking for food.

We have not seen meat, eggs, or dairy products since Israel imposed the full blockade on March 2, and, even before that, we rarely did. The Gaza health authorities have said at

am a human being.

After all, the urge to help another person is one of the most human instincts we have. Solidarity is what defines our humanity. When you want to save a life but are prevented from doing it, it means a whole new horizon of despair has opened. When you want to help with whatever little you have – in this case, part of yourself – but are denied, this leaves a deep scar on the soul.

For 21 months now, we have been denied all our human rights inscribed in international law: The right to water and food, the right to healthcare and housing, the right to education, the right to free movement and asylum, the right to life. Now, we have reached a point where even the urge to save others' lives, the right to show human solidarity, is being denied to us.



least 66 children have died from starvation since the start of the Israeli genocidal war. According to UNICEF, more than 5,000 children were admitted to health facilities across the Strip for treatment of acute malnutrition in May, alone.

Even if some of these children are miraculously saved, they will not have the opportunity to grow up healthy, to develop their full potential, and enjoy stable, secure lives. But beyond the anxiety I felt about the toll starvation has taken on my body and on bodies of my family members, I also felt pain because I had failed to help the wounded. I wanted to help those who are suffering from war injuries and fighting for their lives in the hospital because I

All this is not by chance, but by design. The genocide is not only killing people; it is also targeting people's humanity and solidarity. From charities and food kitchens being bombed, to people being encouraged to carry knives and form gangs to rob and steal food, the strong solidarity that has kept the Palestinian people going through this genocide – through 75 years of suffering and dispossession – is directly under attack.

Cracks may be appearing in our communal bonds, but we shall repair them. We are one big family in Gaza, and we know how to heal and support each other. The humanity of the Palestinian people has always stood victorious.

## Trump's war games and the Nobel prize paradox

United States President Donald Trump is an erratic person who has an insatiable hunger for power and prestige. If Barack Obama could win a Nobel Peace Prize, that is reason enough for Trump to go to any length to emulate the feat. In his desperation, he is 'spreading' global peace with destructive wars. Only someone so seriously erratic can imagine doing that.

He recently made the whole world watch a 12-day war drama in the Middle Eastern theatre. I say 'drama' because America's Operation Midnight Hammer, aimed at eliminating Iran's three nuclear sites, was nothing but a face-saving exercise by Trump. It was at best the appeasement of the Jewish lobby, the powerful god-father effectively ruling the American foreign policy.

To make matters worse, the operation quite badly failed to achieve its strategic objective. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) website says Iran had only suffered 'collateral and infrastructural damage', showing no signs of emissions of nuclear radiations. Much to the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Mossad's nightmare, the Iranian government is still standing on its feet; undefeated. Further, how about the unholy mission of bringing about a 'regime change' in Iran? What should one say about Trump's 'nation-building' project of 'making Iran great again' by installing pro-American puppet Pahlavi dynasty? To top it all, what about Trump's threatening statements directly addressed to the Iranian supreme leader? Trump's bark is definitely worse than his bite.

And, after beating war drums to the tune of the genocidal Israeli government, Trump wants the Nobel Peace Prize. To him, permanent peace is a coward's dream. To him, war is a weapon, the only way to bring adversaries to their knees. To him, chaos is not a crime, but a convenient choice to secure cold peace and fragile ceasefires. To him, diplomacy and dialogue are mere means to an end: deception. Put your hand on your heart, and ask yourself: who is to blame for such humanitarian tragedies, transforming the Middle East into a killing field? How come war criminals and warmongers deserve to be nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize?

Arshad Ali  
Gambat

## Rehabilitation behind bars

In my recent visits to the central prisons of Karachi and Hyderabad in connection with an academic thesis, I had the opportunity to witness first-hand the evolving landscape of prison rehabilitation in Pakistan. I was pleasantly surprised to find that inside the prison walls, various vocational and educational rehabilitation programmes are actively functioning

with the support of various non-governmental organisations (NGOs), equipping the inmates with life skills and restoring their sense of purpose. These initiatives are truly transformative and deserve greater public recognition and state support. What struck me the most, however, was not the programmes, but the human touch that was palpable in the environment. Contrary to the often-harsh stereotypes associated with correctional institutions, I observed a genuine sense of empathy, patience and commitment among many prison officials; both officers and staff. The environment reflected discipline, but no dehumanisation.

It would be nice if mental health professionals — trained counsellors, psychologists and psychiatrists — may be brought on board to address the often-unseen psychological trauma and disorders that many inmates silently endure. Mental health support is essential if we are to truly reintegrate offenders into society as responsible individuals. Rehabilitation within prisons is not merely an idealistic vision; it is a pragmatic investment in safer communities and reduced recidivism. Policymakers should build on the existing momentum, ensuring a holistic rehabilitation framework that includes psychological wellbeing at its core.

Taniya Ahmed  
Jamshoro

## Selective morality and collapse of global diplomacy

The United States has a long history of attacking countries, breaching international norms of diplomacy, shamelessly and recklessly violating sovereignty. Do these actions not warrant condemnation and imposition of sanctions against the US? Many in the international community would agree, but would rather move away wondering who will bell the cat.

Only recently, Iran was on the negotiating table and literally two days prior to another round of parleys, US proxy, Israel, attacked Iran, sabotaging the whole process. Then came the US attacks. Should the world not question credibility of any negotiations or diplomacy with the US in the future as it simply does not follow any established norms? Should the world now cut off diplomatic ties with the US? Should the US be trusted? The US happens to be the only country in the history of mankind to have ever used nuclear bombs — twice, mind you — and it blindly supports Israel even though the latter is not signatory to the non-proliferation treaty (NPT). But the US forces other countries to sign the treaty. That is some audacity. Should the world not condemn these brazen actions?

Why are the world leaders blindfolded, and why on earth Israel has nuclear weapons and nobody questions? Why can Israel unleash unprovoked attacks on its neighbours and the world remains silent about it? Can anyone on

this planet justify the genocide in Gaza? As for the United Nations, it should be abolished as it is completely devoid of any soul at all. The mere rhetoric delivered at the UN will not help the world as those words are worthless, and the UN has no credibility.

Sheikh Taimur Nawaz  
Islamabad

## Manjhi Pur awaits gas restoration

Manjhi Pur, a city in Sohbat Pur district, has been deprived of gas supplies for more than a decade. Gas supplies had begun in 2005, but the devastating floods in 2010 led to the complete disruption of the service. The local residents have repeatedly raised the issue with the authorities concerned, but no attention has been paid. The people have to cut trees and collect animal waste to cook their meals. This affects the environment and the health of women and children. The government should repair the gas pipelines and restore the supply.

Muhammad Hussain  
Sohbat Pur

## Unfair billing slabs

The slab-based pricing mechanism in electricity billing is flawed. According to the prevailing system, if a household's electricity usage crosses the 200-unit threshold even once, they are automatically shifted to a higher slab. This higher slab rate continues for the following six months even if the consumption falls back below 200 units. This is neither rational nor fair. In contrast, residents of multi-storey buildings often install multiple meters. Therefore, their individual consumption remains within lower slabs, allowing them to enjoy significantly lower energy bills despite higher overall usage. Electricity charges should be based on actual monthly consumption rather than based on a penalty system that extends for six months.

Mir Rahman Hakeem Rustamani  
Wahi Pandhi

## Party hopping

This is with reference to the report that PTI-backed lawmaker Chaudhry Usman Ali joins the PML-N. Such reports do not come as a surprise to the people of Pakistan anymore. We have become so attuned to the antics of our turnout parliamentarians that this type of news does not make any impact on the electorate. How can anyone elected under the mandate of a particular party switch sides without going back to the electorate that has voted for him in the first place? Clearly, morality has no place at all in the larger Pakistani political scenario.

Ayub Malik  
Rawalpindi

## Mystery of Mars' missing water could be solved by the planet's tipsy tilt

Deepa Jain

Tremendous tilts of Mars' rotational axis during the past 20 million years may have dried out the planet, according to a new study. The findings may help solve the mystery of how Mars, which once contained lakes, rivers and possibly oceans, lost its water.



Dry, dust-filled deserts cover much of Mars' surface today. Astronomers think most of the planet's scant water reserves are frozen within fine-grained surface dirt, with above-surface ice confined to the polar regions. But the Red Planet hasn't always been so dry. Gullies, lake beds and valleys photographed by early NASA missions like the Viking project suggest that since Mars' birth, the planet's surface has been periodically inundated by billions of gallons of liquid water. In fact, planetary scientists have calculated that the volume of water that carved out these geological features amounted to a layer at least 300 feet (100 meters) thick over the planet's entire surface.

One hypothesis for where the water went is that much of it was 'boiled' off. In a joint email to Live Science, Gabriella Gilli and Francisco González-Galindo, astronomers at the Astrophysics Institute of Andalusia in Spain and the new study's first and second authors, respectively, explained this process. Water vapor in the Martian atmosphere — kicked high up by powerful dust storms — would have separated into atomic hydrogen and oxygen due to the sun's powerful ultraviolet radiation.

## Antarctic sea ice collapse linked to a mysterious spike in ocean salt

Ben Turner

Antarctica's waters are getting saltier and driving a collapse in its sea ice — and scientists aren't sure why.



Antarctic sea ice has been declining since 2015, defying model predictions to hit a record 0.6 million square miles (1.55 million square kilometres) below its expected average extent in 2023. At winter's peak in July of that year, the region was missing a chunk of ice bigger than Western Europe, and it's showing no signs of recovery.

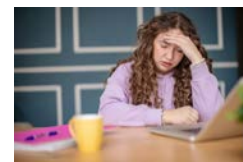
This decline — the largest environmental shift seen anywhere on Earth in recent decades — will have ripple effects on the world's climate. Now, scientists have linked the decline to an unexpected and yet-to-be-explained rise in the saltiness of the waters surrounding the continent. The researchers published their findings in the journal PNAS.

"We were surprised. It's a counterintuitive result because we usually associate melting ice with freshening of the ocean," study lead-author Alessandro Silvano, a senior scientist at the University of Southampton, told Live Science. "This points to a more profound structural shift in the Southern Ocean — not just sea ice, but also the ocean beneath." The sea ice surrounding Earth's poles melts in the summer and freezes in the winter, fluctuating between minimums and maximums. In Antarctica, this ice acts as a moat that protects the continent's increasingly precarious land ice from warming ocean waters, while also reflecting some of the sun's energy back into space and trapping carbon dioxide underneath the ocean's surface. Since satellites began monitoring sea ice extent in 1979, Arctic ice coverage has plunged by more than 12% each decade. Yet the Antarctic's ice continued to steadily grow, hitting an all-time high in 2014.

## Popular weight loss drugs may help treat migraines too

By Julia Ries

Popular diabetes and weight loss medications like Ozempic and Mounjaro show potential for treating a slew of other health issues, from osteoarthritis to binge eating.



Now, new research suggests that these drugs—which belong to a class known as GLP-1s—might also help relieve migraines.

Specifically, people with obesity and chronic migraine experienced significantly fewer headaches after a three-month stint taking liraglutide, a GLP-1 currently used to treat type 2 diabetes, researchers reported in the journal *Headache*. Migraine affects roughly 14% of the global population, making it a leading cause of disability worldwide. The new study was small, with just 31 people, and experts caution that more research is needed. Still, the findings hint at a promising new pathway for migraine relief.

"Despite many advancements in migraine treatment in recent years, there are still many patients who suffer from intractable migraines who may benefit from emerging treatment," said Samantha Flanagan, DO, an obesity medicine physician with Temple Health.

To understand how GLP-1s impact migraine, the researchers recruited 26 women and five men with obesity (a body mass index over 30) and chronic migraine (headaches on at least 15 days per month). Participants took a daily shot containing 1.2 milligrams of liraglutide over 12 weeks. Each day, they filled out a diary detailing the intensity and frequency of their migraine symptoms.

## Eating more of these foods could boost your sleep quality

Megan Margulies

Most people try to follow a nutritious diet so they feel alert and healthy during the day. But a new study shows that eating more fruits and vegetables can lead to benefits while you're asleep, too.



The study, published in *Sleep* Health, found that participants saw a 16% improvement in sleep quality when they increased their fruit and vegetable intake from zero to five cups per day. In fact, the improvements were fairly immediate—greater fruit and vegetable consumption led to less fragmented sleep the subsequent night, the study found.

The results indicate that simple dietary changes could help you rest easy at night, and empower people to focus on the do's of better sleep, rather than the don'ts, study author Marie-Pierre St-Onge, PhD, professor of nutritional medicine and director of the Center of Excellence for Sleep and Circadian Research at the Columbia University Irving Medical Center, told Health.

"We often make recommendations for things to avoid for healthful sleep—don't drink caffeine too late, don't drink too much alcohol," St-Onge told Health. "It's good to know that there are foods that will lead to better sleep." To investigate how daily eating patterns might affect sleep, St-Onge and the other researchers recruited 34 participants between the ages of 20 and 49, the majority of whom were men. To start, all of the participants were in good health and didn't have any history of sleep problems. The study included two six-week phases, with a month between each. The research team asked participants to record all foods and beverages they consumed over multiple 24-hour periods, and also tracked their sleep with wrist actigraphy (a smartwatch-esque monitor).



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