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WEEKLY Cutting Edge

INDEPENDENT • INCISIVE ANALYTICAL

**SUSTAINABLE GROWTH DEMANDS
SUSTAINABLE POLICIES**

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About Us

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

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Sustainable growth demands sustainable policies

Farhan Khan

There is a consensus of opinion among economists that Pakistan cannot tread the path of sustainable growth without structural reforms in fiscal, energy and other sectors. Among others, taxation reforms have been long overdue but no headway has been made in this direction. While the salaried class is heavily taxed, there is no effort to bring undertaxed segments into the net.

Similarly, inefficiencies in energy distribution companies result in higher tariffs. There is no plan on the anvil to accelerate industrial growth. There is much talk about stability, but without reforms, we cannot go up the growth ladder and expand employment opportunities.

It is time the government launched the urgently needed structural reforms to set the economy on a sustainable growth path. In this connection, it is relevant to refer to a recent report jointly released by the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants and the Pakistan Business Council, emphasising the need for reforms in sustainable finance, corporate governance and policy frameworks to tackle current challenges and secure Pakistan's long-term economic future. Titled "Building a Case for Green Business in Pakistan", the report says that adoption of sustainable business practices has become essential for fostering competitiveness in global markets. By directing capital into projects that are environmentally responsible, socially inclusive and economically viable, sustainable finance can help Pakistan overcome some of its most pressing problems, including the climate crisis, food and water security, and attracting much-needed foreign investment. Such a course of action will go a long way to reduce poverty and promote equitable growth.

To this end, we need to speed up the pace of industrialisation and implement business practices that encourage foreign direct investment (FDI). We must remember that investor confidence is shaped not only by financial risk assessments but also by perceptions of the country's stability, and policy direction and consistency. This aspect calls for special attention from government leaders because the current security situation leaves much to be desired. To quote the report, "it is investors who decide which ideas to promote by voting with their capital". Investors look beyond immediate profits and consider the broader, long-term gains of supporting environmentally and socially responsible growth.

It is for the government and regulatory

authorities to create a conducive policy environment characterised by consistency and continuity. In our case, rules and regulations are changed frequently which erodes confidence, and as such investors find it difficult to commit resources to long-term projects. Arbitrary tax rules, frequent policy reversals, weak contract enforcement and the absence of clear policy frameworks discourage new investment. Uncertainty about the direction of policy has a negative impact on the inflow of sustainable finance which requires stable conditions to thrive.

It is a general complaint from business circles that they are forced to divert time and resources towards tackling new rules and procedures instead of working for business growth. Corruption is another serious hurdle in the way of business growth. This saps invest-

a guaranteed system of investor safeguards. Without these foundations, efforts at arousing investor confidence may not attract the kind of long-term capital the country needs.

The SBP Governor recently said that the economy is now on a stable footing, citing the rise in SBP's foreign exchange reserves from USD 2.8 billion to USD 14.3 billion in a little over two years. In another statement, the Deputy Governor told the Senate Standing Committee recently that had the SBP not purchased dollars from the interbank market the PKR would have appreciated against the USD. This is in accordance with the media reports that said that SBP bought 8.2 billion dollars from the market between June 2024 and May 2025. Estimates suggest total purchases of USD 12-14 billion during 2024 and 2025 so far. In other words, PKR stability is tied to SBP's



tor confidence, discourages long-term planning and damages the growth of the economy as a whole. A stable regulatory framework is essential to attract foreign capital and enable domestic enterprises to plan for the future.

The international market has become increasingly competitive and to survive Pakistan must continue to innovate and keep pace with the changing times. We know how our peers like Bangladesh, India, Thailand and Vietnam have succeeded in attracting huge foreign investment by offering reliable industrial ecosystems, stable policies and an easy business environment. Like its peers, Pakistan should also prioritise policy consistency, a fair, open and just dispute resolution mechanism and

active dollar purchases.

However, there is a catch here. As for the current reserve of USD 14.3 billion, if USD 2.4 billion in forward liabilities and USD 12 billion in short-term rollovers are accounted for, usable reserves become nil. Another issue is PKR's appreciation at a time when interest rates have been cut by half. This undermines the long-term prospects of export growth. Major textile exporters cannot expand capacity for new orders because of currency fluctuations, besides high cost of doing business. The upshot is that without further delay the government should offer a new package of incentives to encourage local investors and attract foreign investment.

Post-flood rehabilitation and reconstruction needs

Nasim Ahmed

The devastating floods that have swept through KP, Punjab and Sindh have left an endless trail of death and destruction. In recent years, the intensity and frequency of floods, torrential rains, cloudbursts, windstorms, heatwaves, and droughts have risen sharply. Tens of millions of farmers, especially those holding less than 12.5 acres, are the worst sufferers in flood-affected areas.

Out of 11.7 million farms in the country, nearly 97 per cent of farms are smaller than 12.5 acres. The Kharif crops have almost been wiped out, leaving them with no fallback option. They face the challenge of sustaining their families, as they have lost their wheat stocks and, in many cases, livestock as well. They also have no resources to secure agricultural inputs for the upcoming Rabi (wheat) crop, whose sowing is just over a month away.

Since mid-August, torrential rains, flash floods and cloudbursts have killed more than 500 people across the country, including in Azad Jammu and Kashmir and the Gilgit-Baltistan region. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has been the worst-hit, where swollen rivers, mudslides and collapsing homes have wiped entire families and villages. According to media reports, almost 1000 people have died in rain-triggered floods and landslides nationwide since late June.

At present the government is in a firefighting mode and seems to have no plans to adopt long-term proactive adaptation measures. Like in the past, the government is focussing on short-term relief programmes for affected farmers. But as reported in the media, these efforts are sloppy and marred by corruption, incompetence and bureaucratic delays. Khalid Hussain Batth, Chairman of Kissan Ittehad, recently disclosed that a large number of farmers have not yet received the compensation amount announced for the 2022 flood victims.

The flood disaster in KP and Punjab has been largely caused by unchecked settlements on riverbeds in rural and urban areas. Across the Sutlej and Ravi rivers, houses and livestock sheds have been built on raised mud platforms in the riverbeds. These obstructions have narrowed the river's natural water-carrying capacity, leading to the inundation of vast tracts

On both sides. Such structures have resulted in immense pressure on upstream embankments and bunds. On the other hand, widespread deforestation has stripped the country of natural flood buffers. This has added to the frequency and intensity of floods.

Experts are of the opinion that to deal with future flood emergencies, Pakistan must focus on building resilience through a mix of natural and structural remedies. They advocate restoring wetlands, mangroves and floodplains to absorb excess water, clearing illegal construction from drainage channels, and upgrading city drainage systems with green infrastructure. Simultaneously, measures should be taken to promote flood-resilient

the federal government's Crop Loan Insurance Scheme has remained narrow and restrictive, which defeats its intended purpose. It covers only small- and medium-sized farmers (up to 25 acres) who take agricultural production loans from banks, excluding millions of non-borrowing farmers. Moreover, coverage is limited to major field crops — wheat, rice, cotton, maize, and sugarcane.

As climate change and attendant risks mount with each passing year, the case for universal crop insurance has become imperative. Such a scheme should ensure that all farmers — regardless of landholding size, access to bank loans, or crop type — are automatically covered against flood risk, with



farming backed by insurance and other social safety nets. Further, pre-monsoon drain cleaning, early warning systems, and community shelters can help save many lives.

Along with removing encroachments on riverbeds and river banks, larger investments in watershed management and resilient housing can go a long way in fighting future floods.

Given the growing scale of climate-induced calamities, it has become imperative for the government to move from a relief-based response to pre-emptive risk management mechanisms. This is particularly urgent for floods, which, unlike droughts and heatwaves, have a sudden and devastating impact on vast agricultural lands, often causing long-term soil degradation. Equally urgent is the need to strengthen the financial resilience of farmers in flood-prone areas. At present, the scope of

a meaningful sum insured that can genuinely protect their livelihoods. Advances in computer-based modelling now make it possible to mark flood-prone areas precisely, factoring in weather forecasts, topography of the area, and hydrological data.

Creating space for rivers during flood season and extending crop insurance to all farmers in flood-prone areas are two important measures needed to address the flood challenge on a long term basis. Financial resources are there but the question is whether the government has the political will to develop and implement such a policy package. Needless to say, in case the recommended remedial measures are not put in place at the earliest possible, Pakistan will face the threat of food insecurity, water shortages and mass migration in the future.

Drowning fields, rising fears

Muhammad Zain

The catastrophic floods sweeping across Punjab and Sindh have exposed Pakistan's vulnerability to climate-induced disasters, prompting the federal cabinet to declare a long-overdue climate and agriculture emergency. The widespread destruction of crops, homes, and livelihoods underscores the urgent need for immediate relief and long-term strategies to safeguard the nation's food security and economic stability.

The federal cabinet's decision to declare a climate and agricultural emergency comes as a belated but critical response to the devastating floods ravaging Punjab and threatening other regions. The harrowing scenes of submerged farmlands, displaced families, ruined homes, and dead livestock across thousands of villages highlight the scale of this catastrophe.

The destruction challenges the government's capacity to rehabilitate affected communities, secure food supplies, and restore rural livelihoods amid recurring climate shocks. Immediate relief is paramount: financial aid for smallholder farmers to cover losses, concessional loans for purchasing inputs for the next planting season, and the provision of food, fodder, and medical services in flood-hit areas to prevent disease outbreaks.

Equally pressing is the need to shield consumers from potential spikes in food prices, which may require timely imports and strict measures against profiteering and hoarding. However, the massive human and economic toll, coupled with widespread infrastructure damage from current and past floods, demonstrates that even swift and substantial relief efforts fall short of addressing the root issues. The government must pair immediate aid with sustained investments in climate adaptation and mitigation to ensure that farmers and the broader economy are not perpetually vulnerable to extreme weather events such as floods,

droughts, or heatwaves.

The scale of this national challenge demands comprehensive reforms—constitutional, legal, and social—alongside robust collaboration between federal and provincial authorities. It also calls for active involvement from businesses, affluent individuals, and civil society to bolster climate resilience. Climate change is no longer solely a governmental concern; its impacts extend beyond rural areas, imposing significant costs on businesses as Pakistan's susceptibility to climate-driven disasters grows daily.

The floods devastating Punjab—and looming over Sindh—represent a calamity of unprecedented proportions. In Punjab, the nation's agricultural heartland, vast swathes of crops have been obliterated, prompting urgent calls for an agricultural emergency.



While an official tally of losses from floods and excessive monsoon rains is still pending, the Pakistan Business Forum (PBF) has reported catastrophic damage, estimating that 60% of the rice crop, 35% of cotton, and 30% of sugarcane in central and southern Punjab have been destroyed, alongside severe disruptions to rural livelihoods. In a letter to the prime minister, the PBF urged the declaration of an agricultural emergency, warning that the destruction in Punjab is unprecedented and that Sindh faces a similar fate without immediate action. The forum emphasized that the agricultural targets set for the current fiscal year are now likely unattainable.

The PBF's plea is timely, as the unfolding economic and humanitarian crisis lays bare the fragility of Pakistan's agricultural sector. With food inflation already climbing and significant

quantities of wheat—stored in warehouses or by farmers for personal use—damaged or swept away, the floods threaten the food security of millions in both rural and urban areas.

A recent finance ministry report has cautioned that flood-related losses could exacerbate fiscal pressures, as crop devastation is likely to necessitate increased food and industrial crop imports.

The agricultural sector, which accounts for nearly a quarter of Pakistan's economy and employs almost 40% of its workforce, was already struggling before the floods struck. In the last fiscal year, the sector grew by a mere 0.56%—the lowest in nearly a decade—compared to a five-year average of 3.38%, dragging down overall GDP growth and impacting the industrial and services sectors. With agricultural growth again falling short of targets, this

year is poised to follow a similar trajectory.

While declaring an agricultural emergency is essential to support rural communities, the government must seize this crisis as an opportunity to implement overdue structural reforms in the long-neglected agricultural sector. As a PBF representative underscored, the current crisis should serve as

a clarion call to overhaul agricultural strategies. Without decisive measures to address immediate fallout and prevent long-term decline, Pakistan risks deepening its economic vulnerabilities.

The floods ravaging Punjab and Sindh have thrust Pakistan's agricultural sector into a state of emergency, exposing the fragility of its rural economy and food security. The declaration of a climate and agriculture emergency is a critical step, but it must be accompanied by immediate relief measures and sustained investments in climate resilience. Comprehensive reforms and multi-stakeholder collaboration are essential to mitigate the impacts of recurring climate shocks and secure the nation's economic future. Without bold action, Pakistan faces the risk of deepening food insecurity and economic instability.

Floods, bullets, and bureaucracy: The triple threat to learning in Pakistan

Muhammad Hassan

The convergence of natural disasters, terrorist activities, and systemic bureaucratic inefficiencies has plunged Pakistan's education system into a state of emergency, with the Khyber tribal district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) serving as a stark example of the broader national crisis.

Devastating floods, ongoing militant insurgencies, and administrative failures have disrupted schooling for countless children, threatening their future and exacerbating Pakistan's already alarming education emergency. With millions of young learners out of school, urgent and coordinated action is needed to address the immediate fallout and implement long-term solutions to safeguard education in the face of recurring climate and security challenges. The situation in Khyber is a microcosm of a national crisis driven by floods and terrorism, which together threaten to rob an entire generation of their right to education. In Khyber, prefabricated schools, constructed to replace educational facilities destroyed by militants, lie idle due to bureaucratic bottlenecks within the provincial education department. Compounding this issue, many of these structures were further damaged by last month's torrential rains, leaving students without access to safe learning environments. Over the past few decades, militant insurgencies, particularly in KP and the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), have led to the closure, damage, or destruction of thousands of schools, systematically dismantling educational infrastructure in some of the country's most vulnerable regions.

The current crisis is not limited to Khyber or KP. As floodwaters ravage Punjab and Sindh, the educational prospects of countless children hang in the balance. Reports indicate that over 400 schools in KP and more than 2,000 in Punjab have been damaged or destroyed by floods and heavy rainfall this year alone. These numbers represent not just physical losses but also the disruption of learning for thousands of students, many of whom come from marginalized communities with limited resources to recover. The destruction of schools, coupled with the displacement of families, has created a perfect storm that threatens to deepen Pakistan's already dire education emergency.

Pakistan is grappling with one of the world's most severe education crises, with approximately 26 million children—roughly one in four school-age children—out of school, according to UNESCO and national estimates. This staggering figure is driven by a combination of poverty, inadequate infrastructure, gender disparities, and recurring crises such as militancy and climate disasters. The ongoing Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) insurgency in parts of KP has displaced thousands of families, forcing children to abandon their studies and adding to the chaos. Similarly, the extreme

weather events sweeping through the country, including the catastrophic floods in Punjab and the looming threat in Sindh, have compounded the challenges. These crises not only disrupt education but also exacerbate socioeconomic inequalities, as families displaced by floods or violence struggle to access basic services, including schooling.

The federal and provincial governments must act swiftly to ensure that displaced families have access to education for their children. In the immediate term, this requires setting up temporary learning centers, providing mobile classrooms, and distributing educational materials to affected communities. Once areas are cleared of militants and floodwaters recede, rebuilding educational infrastructure must be prioritized to restore stability and hope for affected children. However, reconstruction efforts must go beyond replacing damaged buildings. The government needs to invest in climate-resilient school designs that can withstand future floods and other extreme weather events. Additionally, security measures must be strengthened to protect schools from militant attacks, particularly in regions like KP, where the TTP remains active. Pakistan cannot afford to see millions more children added to the already staggering number of out-of-school youth. The long-term consequences of failing to address this crisis are profound: an uneducated population is more vulnerable to poverty, extremism, and social instability. While rebuilding schools is a critical step, it is a time-intensive process that cannot fully address the immediate needs of displaced and affected children. To ensure uninterrupted education, innovative and informal methods must be employed. For example, community-based learning programs, radio or online education platforms, and partnerships with local NGOs can provide temporary solutions to keep children engaged in learning. Teachers and volunteers can be mobilized to deliver lessons in makeshift classrooms or open-air settings, ensuring that education continues even in the face of adversity.

The education emergency is further complicated by Pakistan's broader socioeconomic challenges. The agricultural sector, which employs nearly 40% of the workforce and accounts for a quarter of the economy, has been devastated by the floods, threatening food security and livelihoods. This economic strain reduces families' ability to prioritize education, as many are forced to focus on survival. The finance ministry has warned that flood-related losses could necessitate increased food imports, further straining fiscal resources and potentially diverting funds from education and other critical sectors. The combination of economic hardship, displacement, and damaged infrastructure creates a vicious cycle that disproportionately affects the most vulnerable.

To address this multifaceted crisis, the

government must adopt a holistic approach that combines immediate relief with long-term reforms. Constitutional, legal, and social changes are needed to strengthen the education system and make it more resilient to shocks. For instance, decentralizing education governance could empower provincial authorities to respond more effectively to local needs. At the same time, federal support is crucial to ensure equitable resource allocation and coordination. Collaboration with businesses, civil society, and international organizations can also play a pivotal role. Private sector partnerships can fund school reconstruction and provide technological solutions, while NGOs can support community-based education initiatives. International donors, including organizations like UNICEF and the World Bank, can provide financial and technical assistance to bolster Pakistan's education system.

Moreover, addressing the education crisis requires tackling the root causes of vulnerability, including climate change and insecurity. Investments in climate adaptation—such as flood-resistant infrastructure and early warning systems—can reduce the impact of future disasters on schools and communities. Similarly, sustained efforts to counter militancy, including strengthening law enforcement and community engagement, are essential to protect educational facilities and ensure safe learning environments. Without these measures, the miseries of children affected by terrorism and climate disasters will only deepen, perpetuating cycles of poverty, illiteracy, and instability.

The scale of the challenge demands urgent and coordinated action. The government must prioritize education as a national security issue, recognizing that an uneducated population undermines economic growth, social cohesion, and resilience to future crises. By investing in education now, Pakistan can break the cycle of vulnerability and empower its youth to build a brighter future. Failure to act decisively risks condemning millions of children to a life without opportunities, further entrenching the challenges posed by climate change and insecurity.

The destruction of thousands of schools in KP and Punjab, combined with the displacement caused by floods and the TTP insurgency, threatens to rob countless children of their future. Immediate action is needed to provide temporary learning solutions, rebuild resilient educational infrastructure, and implement structural reforms to address systemic vulnerabilities. By combining short-term relief with long-term investments in climate adaptation, security, and education reform, Pakistan can safeguard its youth and build a more resilient society. Without bold and coordinated efforts from federal and provincial authorities, alongside support from civil society and the private sector, the nation risks deepening its education crisis and perpetuating cycles of poverty and instability.

Pakistan's debt time bomb: Rs80.5 trillion and counting

Shahid Hussain

Pakistan's public debt has surged to an unprecedented Rs80.5 trillion by June's end, with a staggering daily increase of Rs25.4 billion, defying legislative limits and straining the nation's fiscal resilience. Official data highlights the growing burden, raising alarms about the sustainability of the country's financial trajectory.

Pakistan's national debt has soared to a historic high of Rs80.5 trillion by the close of the last fiscal year, accumulating at a rate of Rs25.4 billion per day, breaching parliamentary regulations and severely undermining the government's capacity to manage its financial obligations, according to official records. The State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) published its debt bulletin for the 2024-25 fiscal year, revealing a sharp rise in public debt both in absolute figures and as a proportion of the economy. This dual escalation signals a perilous trend of unsustainable borrowing that threatens the nation's economic stability.

By June's end, gross public debt reached Rs80.5 trillion, marking a Rs9.3 trillion or 13% increase compared to the previous fiscal year, as per the central bank's findings. This equates to an average daily borrowing of Rs25.4 billion throughout FY25. Relative to the economy, the debt-to-GDP ratio climbed from 67.8% to 70.2%, contravening the Fiscal Responsibility and Debt Limitation Act, which mandates an annual reduction of 0.5 to 0.75% of GDP until the ratio hits 50% by 2032-33. Yet, the coalition government has failed to comply with the critical legal obligation.

The escalating debt has crowded out investments in critical sectors, with nearly half the national budget diverted to servicing interest payments. Despite this, political pressures from coalition allies continue to drive spending on high-profile projects, prioritising political gains over fiscal prudence.

In total, Pakistan's debt and liabilities reached Rs94.2 trillion by June, equivalent to 82.1% of GDP, as reported by the central bank. The ballooning debt, both in absolute terms

and relative to GDP, casts a shadow on the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which has struggled to enforce fiscal discipline in Pakistan. The breach of statutory debt limits underscores the unsustainability of the country's financial burden. Nonetheless, the IMF has maintained that Pakistan's debt remains manageable, likely to avoid the complexities of immediate debt restructuring. The primary driver of this debt surge has been the need to finance the federal fiscal deficit, with interest payments forming a significant portion. Consequently, Pakistan's financing needs remain alarmingly high, hovering between 20% and 23% of GDP, well above the 15% threshold



considered sustainable for a developing nation like Pakistan.

The central bank's data revealed that domestic debt skyrocketed from Rs47.2 trillion to Rs54.5 trillion within a single fiscal year, a Rs7.3 trillion or 15.5% jump. This growth outpaced both economic expansion and inflation by threefold. External debt also rose, climbing from Rs21.8 trillion to Rs23.4 trillion, an increase of Rs1.7 trillion, despite relative stability in the local currency.

Most of Pakistan's external debt comes from concessional multilateral and bilateral sources. However, the increasing reliance on short-term debt in recent years heightens refinancing risks, further elevating gross financing requirements. Fixed-rate debt constitutes roughly two-thirds of the external debt portfolio.

Pakistan's fiscal health remains precarious, particularly in light of recent catastrophic floods, which are likely to exacerbate pressures on the primary balance and public debt. A finance ministry report warned that limited fiscal flexibility could lead to a sharp deterioration in the primary balance. Should a shock push the primary deficit to historical levels, the debt-to-GDP ratio could surpass the 70% threshold, further jeopardizing debt sustainability, according to last August's debt office report.

The central bank also noted a 13% increase in IMF-related debt, reaching Rs2.63 trillion by June. Pakistan is currently under a \$7 billion IMF bailout package—its 25th such program—aimed at stabilizing fiscal and external accounts.

Soaring debt levels have driven debt servicing costs to unprecedented heights. The SBP reported that Rs13.2 trillion was spent on loan repayments and interest costs in FY25, a 10% or Rs1.2 trillion increase from the prior year. Interest payments alone accounted for Rs9.5 trillion, with Rs162 billion (approximately \$570 million) paid to the IMF.

In dollar terms, Pakistan's external debt and liabilities grew to \$135 billion by June, up by \$4 billion in a single year. The slower pace of external debt growth compared to previous years was partly due to the central bank's purchase of over \$8 billion from the local market.

Pakistan's spiraling debt crisis, marked by a record-breaking Rs80.5 trillion public debt and a daily borrowing rate of Rs25.4 billion, poses a severe threat to the nation's economic stability. Breaching legal limits and consuming a significant portion of the budget for debt servicing, the government faces constrained fiscal space, limiting investments in critical sectors. The persistent rise in both domestic and external debt, coupled with vulnerabilities to economic and environmental shocks, underscores the urgent need for robust fiscal reforms to ensure long-term sustainability.

IS-K's escalating threat in Balochistan

Raza Khan

The claim by the Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K) of responsibility for the September 3 suicide terrorist attack in Quetta targeting the rally of the mainstream political party, Balochistan National Party-Mengal (BNP-M), in which senior leadership of the main opposition Tehreek-e-Tahafuz-e-Ain-e-Pakistan (TTAP or Movement for Safeguarding the Constitution of Pakistan) was also participating, must raise serious concerns regarding the extremely precarious security situation in Balochistan.

The province, which has been witnessing unabated terrorist attacks by separatist ethnic Baloch groups like the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) for over a decade, is also experiencing a sharp spike in attacks by religiously motivated terrorist groups, particularly the Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K).

The IS-K, which is known as the regional chapter of the globally designated terrorist organization, Islamic State (IS), has a very strong footprint in Balochistan at this point in time, and this development is very meaningful and disturbing. Here it is important to note that the largest Pakistani terrorist group, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a banned outfit now referred to by the state as Fitna-ul-Khawarij-e-Hindustan (an India-supported terrorist outfit), has also become active again suddenly in Balochistan. Nevertheless, it is important to observe that while the TTP is active in the Pakhtun parts of Balochistan, the IS-K is focusing its activities in the Baloch areas. The provincial capital Quetta is although a Pakhtun-dominated city, but as being the capital of Balochistan, named after the ethnic Baloch population, it also seriously claims to be a Baloch city. But most people are unaware of the fact that Quetta, although dominated by Pakhtuns, has different sectors dominated by key ethnic groups. For instance, Kuchlak and downtown Meezan Chowk, Liaquat Bazaar, Zarghoon Road, and Pishin Pathak are dominated by Pakhtuns, Zariab Road is dominated by Baloch while Hazara Town is dominated by Hazaras. Keeping this in view, the attack by the IS-K in Quetta on the rally of BNP-M, a party working for the rights of ethnic Balochs taking place on Sariab Road, means that the group was especially focusing on ethnic Baloch leadership.

On the basis of the facts, one could analyze that there is some kind of a tacit collaboration and coordination between the IS-K and the TTP in Balochistan. This is indeed a very serious matter for Pakistan and its law enforcement agencies.

Although the TTP considers the Afghan Taliban and their late founder Mullah Omar Mujahid as their ideological father, whereas the IS-K has had serious differences with the Afghan Taliban, the TTP has had a soft corner for the IS-K. The security apparatus needs to look into the fact that what is the level of coordination between the TTP and the IS-K and what stakes are involved for both the groups to join hands in Balochistan. Only then could they come up with a strong counter response.

In addition to attacks in Balochistan, the IS-K targeting of key political groups of the province and national opposition groups has raised many eyebrows. Although the IS-K has been considering secular-democratic politics and political parties as something working against their understanding of religion, it has not been consistently attacking them, which is something quite confusing. The only rationale for such attacks on the part of the IS-K is to put the political parties and politicians on the defensive. Behind this, the IS-K and its perpetrators have a very well-orchestrated strategy that, seeing the security situation in Balochistan worsen, the IS-K wants to create greater space for itself. For this, the IS-K thinks that browbeating and, if possible, eliminating democratic groups is essential. However, the IS-K may be able to temporarily intimidate political parties but not for the long run. Here the state has to understand the chicanery of the IS-K, and it shall put its weight behind political groups because they could be engaged in a dialogue due to their non-violent makeup and belief in the state, but groups like the IS-K cannot be talked to. Here it may be remembered that the IS-K has been trying over the years to run over Balochistan province; however, it has not been able to do so to a great extent, like the TTP once did in 2009-2010 to completely control North and South Waziristan. In this regard, the IS-K has been staging massive attacks on political groups. For instance, on July 13, 2018, when it claimed responsibility for the attack on an election-related corner meeting of Balochistan Awami Party (BAP) in Mastung near Quetta that had killed at least 150 people.

In this connection, it must be recalled that in September 2016, Pakistani authorities reportedly had busted a huge network of Daesh in Balochistan. Even then, in these lines, we had raised concerns regarding the IS-K's growing presence in Balochistan. Security agencies had also arrested the top ten commanders of IS, who were said to be on a mission in the country to recruit thousands of foot soldiers for the IS Middle East's war theater, specifically in Iraq and Syria. The group once controlled over large swathes of territory in Iraq and

Syria but then lost a good part of it to state and international forces in both the countries. It was then revealed that the arrested top ten commanders had just returned after meeting the Daesh head of Khorasan (Pak-Afghan-Iran-India-Central Asia) region, namely Hafiz Saeed Khan, in Afghanistan before his death in a US drone strike in Afghanistan a few weeks back. Many of them had also met Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the late kingpin of the IS in Syria and Iraq. According to authorities, "He (Hafiz Saeed Khan) had ordered them to spread chaos in Pakistan and create a situation for the Daesh caliphate in Pakistan."

All the incidents and facts show the threat which the Afghanistan-based Khorasan chapter of IS poses to the security of Pakistan and its citizens. However, another important aspect of the unearthing of the IS network in Daesh in Balochistan in 2016 was that some of the group's commanders, who had been arrested, were directly in contact with the central leadership based in Iraq and Syria. This also had demonstrated how important Pakistan has been from IS's central leadership point of view and matters significantly in their strategic calculation. This importance of Pakistan and specifically Balochistan for the IS-K continues today. The recent attack in Quetta on the BNP-M rally must be understood against the backdrop of this IS-K long strategy regarding Pakistan.

Even at the time of the busting of the IS-K network in Pakistan in 2016 too, we had written in these lines that terrorist networks like the IS were not very easy to be eliminated as they had a tendency to resurface. The recent attacks by the IS-K in Balochistan are indicative of this fact.

The IS is having a strong anti-Shiite and anti-Iranian agenda, and as Balochistan province also makes the border of Pakistan with Iran, the IS would love to have a strong network in the province. It may be mentioned here that Iran's own separatist Baloch group, Jundullah, which later put on religious garb, also cultivated a network in Pakistani Balochistan. Iran also has a province by the name of Sistan-Balochistan, which is a Sunni-dominated province in the predominantly Shiite country.

The ethnic-based conflict in Balochistan has kept the province volatile. Pakistan's arch-rival, India, has been taking advantage of this situation to create problems for Pakistan. The arrest of Indian naval officer Kulbhushan Yadav years back by Pakistani authorities in Balochistan points towards this fact. It is a signature tactic of terrorist groups to exploit any conflict and crisis to their utter advantage. Thus, the IS has wanted to take advantage of the volatile situation, which has been prevailing in Balochistan for years.

The fight against hunger in post-flood Pakistan

Dr. Zaheer Ahmad Babar

The monsoon season of 2025 brought unprecedented devastation to Pakistan, unleashing floods that rivaled the catastrophic 2022 deluge in scale and fury. Triggered by relentless heavy rains exacerbated by climate change, the floods submerged vast swathes of the country, particularly in Punjab and Sindh provinces, displacing millions and claiming over 800 lives.

As the waters recede on September 15, the nation grapples with a looming food security crisis that threatens to push millions into hunger and poverty. Agriculture, the backbone of Pakistan's economy employing 37% of the workforce and contributing 20% to GDP, has been ravaged, leaving a trail of destroyed crops, drowned livestock, and eroded soil. This article explores the multifaceted challenges to food security in the flood's aftermath, from immediate shortages to long-term vulnerabilities.

The floods struck during the critical Kharif cropping season, wiping out an estimated 1.3 million acres of farmland and causing agricultural losses exceeding \$1.5 billion. In Punjab, the breadbasket of Pakistan, standing crops of rice, cotton, and sugarcane—key staples and export commodities—were submerged under meters of murky water. Farmers in districts like Rahim Yar Khan and Muzaffargarh report fields turned into lakes, with irrigation canals breached and topsoil washed away. Livestock, vital for dairy and meat production, suffered immensely; thousands of animals perished, and survivors face fodder shortages as pastures were inundated. One farmer from Sindh shared on social media how his entire herd of 50 buffaloes was lost overnight, erasing years of savings and plunging his family into debt. The Pakistan Meteorological Department attributes the intensity to erratic weather patterns, with rainfall 200% above average in some areas, underscoring the growing threat of climate-induced disasters.

These agricultural setbacks have directly imperiled food production and supply chains. Pakistan, already importing 40% of its edible oil and a significant portion of wheat, now faces acute shortages of domestic staples.

Rice output, projected to drop by 30%, could exacerbate global prices while straining local markets. Cotton, a cash crop supporting textile industries, saw yields halved, indirectly affecting rural incomes and food purchasing power. The destruction of storage facilities and roads has disrupted distribution, leading to spoilage and uneven access. In flood-hit areas, markets in Lahore and Karachi have seen vegetable prices surge by 50-70%, turning affordable nutrition into a luxury for the urban poor. The Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET) warns of short-term, localized acute food insecurity affecting up to 5 million households, with Phase 3 (Crisis) levels of hunger in rural Sindh and Balochistan.

Vulnerable populations bear the brunt of

inflation could climb to 15%, eroding wages and deepening poverty cycles.

Government response has been swift but strained. The National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) has mobilized emergency funds, distributing 200,000 tons of wheat and fortified foods through the Benazir Income Support Programme. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif declared a national emergency, allocating Rs100 billion for agricultural rehabilitation, including subsidized seeds and fertilizers for the Rabi season. International partners like the World Food Programme (WFP) and USAID have pledged \$500 million in aid, focusing on cash transfers and resilient crop varieties. However, critics argue that bureaucratic delays and corruption hinder delivery, with only 40%

of aid reaching affected areas in the first month. Long-term strategies, such as building flood-resilient dams and promoting climate-smart agriculture, remain underfunded amid Pakistan's \$130 billion external debt.

The broader implications extend to economic stability and national security. The floods threaten to slash FY26 GDP growth to 3.2%, with agriculture's contraction risking a balance-of-payments crisis as imports rise. Food insecurity could fuel social unrest, as seen in past shortages, and strain relations with neighbors over water sharing. Pakistan ranks eighth globally in climate vulnerability, and without adaptation—such as early warning systems and

diversified farming—these floods may become annual recurrences. Experts call for a 'Green Recovery Plan,' integrating sustainable practices to safeguard food systems against future shocks.

In conclusion, the floods have exposed Pakistan's fragile food security architecture, blending immediate humanitarian needs with systemic climate risks. With millions at risk of famine-like conditions, urgent international solidarity is essential. Rebuilding must prioritize equity, innovation, and resilience to ensure that Pakistan's fields bloom again, feeding its people and fueling its future. As one observer put it, these disasters are "gambling with nature," but proactive measures can tip the odds in humanity's favor. The path ahead is arduous, yet with collective resolve, Pakistan can emerge stronger from this deluge.



this crisis. Rural communities, where 65% of Pakistanis reside, are hit hardest. Women and children, who often manage household food resources, face heightened risks of malnutrition. The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) analysis for November 2024 already highlighted acute food insecurity in 68 districts due to economic woes and disasters; the 2025 floods have amplified this, driving up stunting rates among children under five, already at 40% nationally. Displaced families in makeshift camps rely on sporadic aid, but contaminated water sources pose secondary threats of waterborne diseases, further weakening nutritional status. In Punjab, the floods have "drowned farmland and triggered a food insecurity crisis," as noted by humanitarian organizations, reshaping livelihoods for generations. Economic analysts predict

Disasters and misuse of religion in Pakistan

Faheem Amir

A state, like a human being, must constantly face new challenges. Nations everywhere confront floods, earthquakes, famines, tsunamis, epidemics, and political, social, or economic shocks. What defines their future is not the calamities themselves but how they prepare for and respond to them.

Progressive states craft laws, build robust institutions, embrace scientific advancements, and establish social safety nets to mitigate suffering. In contrast, regressive states rely on excuses, hollow promises, ineffective policies, and religious rhetoric to mask their failures.

Japan lies on one of the world's most perilous seismic zones. Yet, over the past century, it has transformed vulnerability into resilience.

The 1923 Great Kantō earthquake (7.9 magnitude) claimed over 105,000 lives, while the 2011 Tōhoku disaster (9.0 magnitude) and tsunami resulted in nearly 18,500 deaths. More recent quakes show a remarkable shift: the 2016 Kumamoto tremors (7.0 magnitude) caused 277 deaths, and the 2024 Noto Peninsula quake (7.6 magnitude) resulted in 55 fatalities. Despite increasing seismic intensity, stronger building codes, early-warning systems, and widespread citizen preparedness have significantly reduced loss of life.

Following the devastation of World War II, Japan rebuilt not through religious rhetoric but through effective governance, meticulous planning, and scientific innovation. By 2024, it stood as the world's third-largest economy, with services accounting for roughly 71% of GDP and manufacturing driving global leadership in robotics and automobiles. This underscores that governance, strategic management, and science are the true pillars of survival and nation-building.

China's modern history, by contrast, began with a "century of humiliation" marked by foreign invasions, imperialist domination, devastating famines, and widespread illiteracy. In the early 20th century, literacy rates languished below 20%, life expectancy was a mere 32–35 years, and famines claimed millions. The Maoist era's Great Leap Forward triggered famines that killed 30 to 45 million, while the Cultural Revolution

disrupted education and governance. Yet, post-1978 reforms sparked one of history's most remarkable transformations. GDP growth averaged over 9% annually for three decades, lifting nearly 800 million people out of poverty. Literacy rates soared, life expectancy nearly doubled, and infrastructure, education, and industry modernized at an unprecedented pace.

This transformation culminated in September 2025, when China celebrated Victory Day with its largest-ever military parade in Beijing. Attended by leaders from 26 countries—including Vladimir Putin, Kim Jong Un, and Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif—the event featured 12,000 troops and showcased advanced weaponry like hypersonic missiles, underwater drones, and AI-powered tanks, symbolizing China's ascent to global power. From famine and ignorance to

many leaders and clerics offer blame. Some religious scholars interpret floods, cloudbursts, and glacial outbursts as divine retribution for sins like adultery, drinking, dishonesty, or corruption. Prominent clerics have linked immorality at tourist resorts to these disasters, suggesting nature itself rebels against such behavior. Similar claims were made during the 2010 and 2011 floods, framing calamities as divine punishment.

These narratives serve a darker purpose: they shield the ruling elite from accountability, diverting blame onto vulnerable citizens already suffering from poverty and ignorance, drowning alongside their children, livestock, and crops. Instead of confronting those responsible for mismanagement and illegal encroachments, the burden of guilt is placed on the victims.

Pakistan's health sector mirrors this failure.

While most of the world eradicated polio, Pakistan continues to report cases, hampered by corruption and resistance fueled by religiously cloaked misinformation. Millions lack access to clean water or sanitation. Twenty-two million children remain out of school, even as elites amass wealth through subsidies, tax exemptions, and land allotments. Poverty afflicts over 42% of the population—yet sermons blame the poor for their plight.

This pattern is deliberate, a hallmark of Pakistan's elite governance. Religion has been weaponized repeatedly for political gains. The elite's contradictions are stark. Yet religion need not be a tool of oppression. The Iranian thinker Ali Shariati envisioned it as liberation for the mostazafin—the oppressed. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) declared: "Every one of you is a shepherd, and every one of you will be asked about his flock. The leader is a guardian and is responsible for his subjects." In Islam, rulers are accountable for justice and stewardship, not for deflecting blame.

Disasters do not always reflect divine will; they test governance. Japan and China transformed tragedy into progress through planning, science, and accountability. Pakistan's true disaster is not floods or epidemics but a system that refuses to learn—where sermons replace service, and excuses supplant reform. Until rulers are held accountable, Pakistan will continue to drown—not in water, but in the failures of its elite.



influence and military might, China's journey highlights the power of management, science, and state-building. Its leaders did not attribute floods or famines to divine punishment; they reformed institutions, invested in human capital, and built resilient infrastructure.

Conversely, in Pakistan, every calamity becomes a pretext for the ruling elite to conceal their incompetence. Rather than accountability, citizens are told that floods, epidemics, and poverty are "Allah's punishment" for their sins. The 2022 floods killed over 1,700, affected 33 million, and caused \$30 billion in losses. The 2025 monsoon season has already claimed over 900 lives and displaced nearly 900,000 in Punjab alone. Major cities—Lahore, Gujrat, Sialkot, Multan—were inundated not by divine wrath but due to clogged drains, encroached rivers, and approximately 5,000 illegal housing societies obstructing natural waterways. With forest cover at a mere 4–5%, Pakistan remains defenseless against flash floods and landslides.

Yet, instead of implementing reforms,

Israel wants us to evacuate al-Shifa Hospital again to kill hope

Hadeel Awad

When I walk into the emergency ward of al-Shifa Hospital, I feel like I am back in October 2023, when the shocking number of wounded and dead brought in would overwhelm us every day. I see daily dozens of children, elderly, women and men rushed into the hospital with horrific injuries; many would be missing a limb or an eye.

The difference is that back in October 2023, we still had medical supplies and fuel for electricity, we were fully staffed, and all of the hospital wards were still functioning.

The medical complex was repeatedly targeted in the genocide, and substantial parts of it were destroyed. With the efforts of hospital staff, the building of the outpatient clinics was restored and turned into the emergency ward; part of the surgery department was transformed into intensive care for bedridden patients.

Some doctors and nurses returned to work, but by far not enough. We do not have the necessary medical supplies to tackle the constant inflow of injured patients. Electricity keeps cutting off because of fuel shortages, and we are forced to use saltwater for drinking.

The medical staff are exhausted and starved. Earlier this week, I had an 18-hour shift during which all I had to eat was a single can of tuna. Amid this horror, forced evacuation is looming over the hospital once again. We work in a constant state of fear of what comes next.

The atmosphere is heavy, and faces are tense. Patients look to us, the medical staff, for reassurance, while we try to hide our anxiety and hold ourselves together. It is difficult to make any preparations for departure, given that we have received no clear information and no instructions about where to relocate. We don't have enough vehicles to transport the large number of bedridden patients, some of whom are in critical condition, breathing on ventilators, and could die if moved. We have been given no guarantees that if we were to depart, we would be safe along the way.

We are still trying to make some basic preparations: medical files are being sorted, and lists of transport priorities are being compiled. But these activities are only deepening our despair. Nothing is more difficult than being forced to leave, not knowing where you would go ... or how.



Then there is the question of what happens to the communities we serve after we leave. Al-Shifa remains a vital lifeline for healthcare in Gaza and a last resort for thousands of sick and injured people. The only other functioning hospital in the area is al-Ahli, but the conditions there are much worse than in half-destroyed al-Shifa. I went there recently on a visit and saw that there had been a lot of attacks in its vicinity; the sound of bombing was very loud.

If we are forced to leave al-Shifa, Gaza City will largely be deprived of health services. This would be a death sentence for the people who choose to stay and are injured or otherwise fall ill. It would extinguish the last vestiges of hope people try to cling to. We have already been through this horror once before. In November 2023, we received orders to evacuate. We stayed, we were besieged, we ran out of fuel and food. The Israelis stormed the hospital and forced us to leave – hundreds of us, staff, walked to the south.

I did not return to al-Shifa until last month. When I saw the difficult situation

inside the recovered area, my heart sank. I was not used to working in such conditions. What made my work even more painful was that I found out that a number of my colleagues had been killed in the 20 months we had been apart. At least three of the female nurses I worked with had been martyred.

As another evacuation looms, I feel a mixture of fear, anger, and anxiety. This hospital is not just a workplace, but a refuge and a last resort for thousands of people. The thought of seeing it emptied of its staff and patients once again and perhaps destroyed completely is heartbreaking.

Despite all this, we persist. We continue to treat the injured, console them, and cling to what remains of our responsibility. We dress wounds under the light of our mobile phones, perform operations under the sound of bombardment, and deal with death as a daily adversary.

We owe it to our patients, to our people, to demonstrate that even in the face of the worst horrors, we will keep going for as long as we can.

Charlie Kirk and the danger of selective empathy

Christopher Rhodes

Conservative political activist Charlie Kirk was shot and killed. His suspected killer, identified by law enforcement as 22-year-old Tyler Robinson, was taken into custody after a substantial manhunt, based on information from people close to Robinson's family.

Utah Governor Spencer Cox said a family member of Robinson had reached out to a friend, who then contacted the authorities, and that friends and relatives interviewed by investigators described Robinson as "full of hate" when speaking about Kirk at a recent gathering. Robinson's exact motivations for allegedly carrying out the shooting are still being explored.

If past instances of political attacks are any guide, more detailed information about Robinson's potential motivations may be revealed over time. But we don't need to read a manifesto or scroll through social media posts to know that any attempt to justify killing Kirk over his words or views is indefensible.

I mostly avoided Kirk's rhetoric over the years. I found most of the content I heard from him distasteful, both to me and to many other Americans, and offensive to objective facts and discourse. Kirk often cherry-picked and distorted history to push agendas that many of us believe are not only abhorrent but also dangerous to racial and ethnic minorities, immigrants, and other marginalised people.

But I did not want Kirk to be harmed. When I learned that he had been shot, I did not want him to die. On the contrary, I prayed that God's will be done in the situation – the same God whom Kirk and I both claimed, whatever our political disagreements may have been. I hoped that he would recover, and that his brush with death might help him gain a new, more constructive perspective on politics and life.

Last summer, I had similar hopes (though perhaps not expectations) that Donald Trump would be changed for the better after he survived an assassination attempt while speaking at a campaign event. "Trump has the opportunity to put the peace and security of the country ahead of his personal ambition," I wrote at the time. "Perhaps coming so close to death will change his perspective on stirring up his supporters."

That did not happen. Instead, Trump quickly returned to the same sort of demonising rhetoric and selective outrage that has heightened and polarised American politics. He pardoned the January 6 rioters who attacked Capitol police officers, as well as the Proud Boys

members who had been convicted of conspiring against the United States government. And even with Kirk dying from a shooting similar to the one that almost took Trump's life last year, the president and many of his supporters have mainly doubled down on the type of vitriol that has become all too common in American politics.

This is not to say that the MAGA movement or the right has been alone in condoning political violence or dehumanising others. When UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson was shot and killed late last year, his alleged killer, Luigi Mangione, became somewhat of a folk hero. While this killing does not appear to be explicitly partisan, many of the comments that mocked Thompson or celebrated Mangione took on the tone of class warfare. And when unsub-

with whom you disagree day after day, year after year, in the most hateful and despicable way possible."

Now seems like an appropriate time to remind you that, less than a year ago, Trump appeared on Fox News and referred to leftists as "the enemy from within" and "Marxists and communists and fascists," specifically naming Adam Schiff and "the Pelosis" and calling them "so sick and so evil." "From the attack on my life in Butler, Pennsylvania, last year, which killed a husband and father, to the attacks on ICE agents, to the vicious murder of a healthcare executive in the streets of New York, to the shooting of House Majority Leader Steve Scalise and three others, radical Left political violence has hurt too many innocent people and taken too many lives."

Noticeably absent from the president's list were several violent, sometimes lethal, attacks against Democrats or carried out by self-declared MAGA followers. It is a calculated choice to condemn the shooting of a prominent Republican in 2017 but not the murders of two Democrats and the shooting of two others in Minnesota three months ago, or the torching of the Pennsylvania governor's mansion while Democrat Josh Shapiro and his family slept inside. Condemning "attacks on ICE agents" after pardoning dozens of people who attacked Capitol police officers is a cynical double standard.

Through the discourse surrounding Kirk's death, I've become familiar with the term "selective empathy," a succinct phrase that covers a concept with which many of us are familiar. At their worst, President Trump and even Kirk engaged in this type of moral relativism, condoning actions against their opponents that they would condemn if done to their allies. And those of us who reject the MAGA ideology are at our worst when we tolerate, excuse, or even celebrate, violence against those who oppose us or who hold us in disdain.

At his best, Charlie Kirk manifested his core religious and political beliefs by appealing to the universal values of love and human dignity rooted in Christianity and the principle of equality on which the United States was founded. While he often failed to conform his rhetoric to these larger principles, Kirk and others in his ideological camp are still deserving of the empathy embedded in those principles. To deny them such consideration based on their views would be to undermine our own opposition to their divisive and even dangerous rhetoric. For all our sakes, we can and must do better.



stantiated rumours about Trump's health started to circulate recently, many of his detractors seemed to celebrate the possibility that Trump could be incapacitated or worse, and expressed disappointment when he re-emerged in the public eye.

But toxic online rhetoric is one thing, and nearly any popular topic will elicit offensive or hateful commentary on social media. With the MAGA movement led by Trump, the hateful language of its most trollish followers is often indistinguishable from the rhetoric coming from the movement's loudest and most prominent voices. After breaking the news of Kirk's death on social media, President Trump posted a four-minute video honouring Kirk and demonising the political left.

"For years, those on the radical left have compared wonderful Americans like Charlie to Nazis and the world's worst mass murderers and criminals. This kind of rhetoric is directly responsible for the terrorism that we're seeing in our country today, and it must stop right now. It's long past time for all Americans and the media to confront the fact that violence and murder are the tragic consequence of demonising those

End of US monopoly, dawn of China's leadership

Beijing staged a stunning display of military power, technological mastery and economic confidence. While commemorating the end of World War II, the underlying message was unmistakable: China, backed by its allies, is reshaping the global order, and the United States is no longer the lone superpower.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which was once an informal alliance, has now been transformed into a strategic, political and economic bloc. For decades, the Pentagon believed that American technological superiority was untouchable. Beijing's show of force has shattered that illusion. Analysts in the Western world have been forced to confront the undeniable reality: China can now match or exceed US capabilities in precision strike, strategic range, and integrated defence.

Having said that, China's dominance is not based on weapons alone; it rests on a deeper foundation of economic strength. Donald Trump's tariffs, designed to cripple Beijing's industrial power, instead exposed America's own vulnerabilities. China today controls over 90 per cent of global rare earth magnet production, and nearly 85pc of semiconductor-grade mineral processing. When Beijing announced export restrictions on seven critical rare earth elements early this year, requiring special licences for buyers, the shockwaves reverberated across the US. For the first time, the US found itself dependent on Beijing's will to maintain the heartbeat of its technological infrastructure.

While Washington reacted defensively, Beijing quietly built an entirely new architecture of global trade and influence. Through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has connected more than 150 countries via roads, railways, ports, energy pipelines, industrial zones and digital corridors. Unlike the West's traditional dependency model, Beijing offered investment, infrastructure and market access on terms many developing nations found massively equitable. By empowering local economies through financing and infrastructure, China has created an alternative model of prosperity — one based on cooperation rather than coercion.

As for the SCO, the bloc now represents nearly half the world's population, accounts for 30pc of global gross domestic product (GDP), and controls over 40pc of global oil and gas reserves. By aligning supply chains, financial systems and technological ecosystems, member states have built collective resilience capable of resisting US pressure. Trump's tariffs war has actually paved the way for an alternative global leadership. In contrast, the Western bloc, which was once a cohesive alliance of North America and Europe, is showing cracks under the weight of Trump's unilateral policies. The differences over Israel's ongoing genocide in Gaza have eaten away Washington's influence over its closest allies. With its military might on show,

Beijing has delivered a message that has been heard loud and clear across continents. China is no longer rising — it is leading. And it leads not through conquest, but through trade, technology, investment and inclusion.

The world is reorganising around this reality, and, for the first time in a century, Washington is no longer writing the script.

Qamar Bashir

Blacklisting of NGOs

The Public Accounts Committee (PAC) of the Sindh Assembly has ordered black-listing of eight non-governmental organisations (NGOs) for failing to provide audit records, invoices and expenditure details. People in the development sector have aired serious reservations about the move. There is something that all concerned have to be very clear about; the NGOs are not formed and run by angels, and, that being so, there is always a chance of irregularities.

However, civil society organisations (CSOs) have strong internal and external audit and accountability systems that detect cases of financial and professional backtracking. Non-profit entities that do not perform properly go into oblivion as the donors are not interested in funding such entities.

NGOs have changed the attitudes of a significant segment of the population and provided desperately needed support during natural calamities. They have also contributed to other critical social domains. However, despite the utmost efforts of the non-profit sector in Sindh to coordinate and collaborate with government, media and religious leaders, there has remained a high level of distrust between these powerful stakeholders, which is such a pity.

Gulsher Panhwer
Johi

Sugar crisis exposes double standards

If there is one thing we have learnt from all the past and present sugar crises, it is that no action will ever be taken against those responsible for the soaring prices. Mill-owners want to increase their wealth, buy properties and go on vacations. After all, most of them have spent a lot in getting elected to parliament. We should let them enjoy their illegally obtained wealth and not waste our time and energy in pointing out the rampant corruption around us. It is purely our fault for living in a country where there is one law for them and another for us.

Shakir Lakhani
Karachi

Public rights

I was recently hiking towards Trail 5 in Islamabad via Constitution Avenue. I planned to turn left from Judge's Colony, but I was stopped by police personnel who had completely blocked the road. When I asked the rea-

son for closure, they casually replied that they did not know. It is unfair that ordinary citizens face such inconvenience without explanation so that certain individuals may enjoy their luxury, security and protocol. We, the people, do not interfere in anyone's duties, but constantly face disruptions in our lives. Those in power should stop blocking public routes unnecessarily, and respect the rights of the people.

Anas Nawaz
Islamabad

Unpaid internships deepen inequality

Internships have become a systemic problem in Pakistan. Instead of providing a pathway to career advancement, unpaid internships exploit young professionals without giving them any significant exposure. Even when interns are paid, the amount is nothing more than peanuts, considering the workload they handle.

A recent research conducted by the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE) revealed that more than 60 per cent of undergraduates having had internship exposure reported receiving little to no compensation. This is sheer and utter exploitation. For students with economically disadvantaged backgrounds and those who belong to rural areas, the burden of food, transportation and accommodation is too much to handle, and they often have no choice but to turn down such opportunities. Their failure to have sufficient corporate expertise in the early stage of their career significantly affects their chance to keep their professional career on the right track.

In addition to the financial strain, internships with no or meagre honorarium exert a substantial influence on the psychological and emotional wellbeing of these young individuals. A meta-analysis of 7,652 students attending college across Pakistan showed that 42.7pc respondents reported signs of depression, which was considerably higher than the worldwide median of about 27pc for medical school graduates.

In Pakistan, corporate internships remain an unregulated area. There are no laws binding establishments to pay their trainees, and there are no guidelines about internship duration. Internships are meant to assist students in gaining professional experience, not to function as unpaid labour carrying out full-scale duties for months. There is a need to ensure that internships offer organised learning opportunities, coaching and skill-development planning along with due financial compensation.

The exploitation of interns in the name of 'professional experience' must cease. Otherwise, internships in their present form would continue to widen the disparity between privileged and deprived students. Reforms are crucial and, thus, necessary.

Maha Saleem
Lahore

Common bathroom habit linked to 46% higher risk of hemorrhoids

Simon Spichak

If you like to bring your phone to the bathroom, you might be more likely to develop hemorrhoids. That's according to a new study published in PLoS One, which found that people who used their phones on the toilet were 46% more likely to have this gastrointestinal condition based on colonoscopy results.



Spending extra time sitting can restrict blood flow and compress the veins, increasing the risk of hemorrhoids. "The study is very timely, as cell phone use appears to be ubiquitous," said Brian C. Jacobson, MD, MPH, a gastroenterologist with Massachusetts General Hospital and a spokesperson for the American Gastroenterological Association who wasn't involved in the research. "It should be noted, reading any material on the toilet was also highly associated with hemorrhoids, so the issue is not smartphones per se, but spending additional time on the toilet," he told Health. Constipation was once thought to be the main culprit behind hemorrhoid disease, said Trisha Pasricha, MD, MPH, the new study's senior author and a gastroenterologist at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center. Now, researchers believe the condition is more linked to straining and changes in pressure that affect hemorrhoid veins. "Over the last several years, our thinking about hemorrhoids has really evolved," she told Health. While previous studies have examined how activities such as reading a newspaper on the toilet might affect hemorrhoid risk, the impact of cellphone use had remained an open question.

New study links 6 artificial sweeteners to faster cognitive decline

Kristen Fischer

Replacing sugar with low- or no-calorie sweeteners is a popular way to manage weight. But a new study found relying on certain sugar substitutes may be bad for your brain health.



The study, published in *Neurology*, found that people who consumed the highest amounts of six artificial sweeteners also had the greatest declines in thinking and memory, as compared to those who consumed less. Those declines amounted to 1.6 years of additional brain aging. The results don't mean someone will notice memory issues immediately after drinking a soda sweetened with aspartame, said study author Claudia Kimie Suemoto, MD, PhD, associate professor of geriatrics at the University of São Paulo Medical School in Brazil.

But for people who consume these sweeteners often, "it does mean their brain may be aging at a quicker pace, which over time could increase the risk of earlier or more severe cognitive impairment," she told Health. Suemoto and her colleagues looked at data from 12,772 Brazilian adults who were 52 years old on average. At the beginning of the study, the participants filled out questionnaires about what they usually ate and drank over the previous year. The research team specifically tracked seven low- and no-calorie sweeteners that show up in common grocery items such as soda, low-calorie desserts, yogurt, or as standalone products: Aspartame, Saccharin, Xylitol, Erythritol, Sorbitol, Tagatose, Acesulfame K.

The scientists then split participants into groups based on their intake of these low- or no-calorie sweeteners: Low: about 20 milligrams (mg) per day; Moderate: about 66 mg per day; High: about 191 mg per day, about the equivalent of one can of diet soda.

NASA claims it's found the 'clearest sign' yet of past life on Mars

Ben Turner

Strange nodules of unusual minerals found on speckled rocks on Mars have offered more tantalizing clues that ancient life may have once thrived on the now-dead planet, NASA says.



NASA's Perseverance rover found one such arrow-shaped rock, nicknamed Cheyava Falls, in 2024 along the northern bank of Neretva Vallis, the dried-up remnants of an ancient river that once rushed into Mars' Jezero crater. An initial analysis of the rock, which appeared in a lake bed formation known as Bright Angel, revealed it was crammed with organic compounds, had evidence that water once flowed through it, and contained flecks of leopard-like spots from chemical reactions that ancient microbes could have used for energy. These features may result from non-biological processes occurring over millions of years. But now, in a new study published in the journal *Nature*, NASA scientists have announced intriguing details about additional rock samples found at two nearby sites — and they say these clues bolster the case for past life on Mars. "After a year of review, they have come back and they said, listen, we can't find another explanation," Acting NASA Administrator Sean Duffy, said during a news briefing following the announcement.

'New' island emerges from melting ice in Alaska

Patrick Pester

A 'new' island has appeared in the middle of a lake in southeastern Alaska after the landmass lost contact with a melting glacier, NASA satellite images reveal.



The landmass, named Prow Knob, is a small mountain that was formerly surrounded by the Alsek Glacier in Glacier Bay National Park. However, Alsek Glacier has been retreating for decades, slowly separating itself from Prow Knob and leaving a growing freshwater lake in its wake. A recent satellite image, taken by Landsat 9 in August, reveals that the glacier has now lost all connection to Prow Knob, according to a statement released by NASA's Earth Observatory. Prow Knob provides a clear visual example of how glaciers are thinning and retreating in southeastern Alaska.

"Along the coastal plain of southeastern Alaska, water is rapidly replacing ice," Lindsey Doermann, a science writer at the NASA Earth Observatory, wrote in the statement. "Glaciers in this area are thinning and retreating, with meltwater forming proglacial lakes off their fronts. In one of these growing watery expanses, a new island has emerged." Alsek Glacier used to split into two channels to wind its way around Prow Knob, which has a landmass of about 2 square miles. In the early 20th century, the glacier extended across the now-exposed Alsek Lake and as far as Gateway Knob, about 3 miles west of Prow Knob. The late glaciologist Austin Post, who captured aerial photographs of Alsek in 1960, named Prow Knob after its resemblance to the prow (pointed front end) of a ship. Post and fellow glaciologist Mauri Peltó, a professor of environmental science at Nichols College in Massachusetts, previously predicted that Alsek Glacier would release Prow Knob in 2020, based on the rate it was retreating between 1960 and 1990, according to the statement.



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